



Evie
AND THE
*Pack-Horse
Librarians*



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Evie and the Pack-Horse Librarians

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Evie and the Pack-Horse Librarians

Laurel Beckley

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Sorry honey, this still isn't about us.

11th of Antis, 204th Year of the Diamond

A hard knot had formed in Evie's throat since she was summoned into Mr. Lodge's corner office, and now the butterflies in her stomach transformed into a hive of angry bees threatening to upset her meager breakfast.

Mr. Lodge gave another long *humph*, the fifth in as many minutes.

Evie shuffled in her seat, trying to keep her fingers knotted together in her lap, struggling to prevent her feet from tapping with anxiety.

After an eternity, Mr. Lodge looked up from the newspaper, placing it carefully onto his desk. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, his usually cheerful expression was gone, replaced with a stern man Evie didn't recognize.

"Miss Southeil," he began, then stopped. Another sigh. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his long nose. Evie unconsciously mimicked the gesture, pushing her own wire-rimmed glasses further onto her face. She caught a glimpse of her ink-stained fingers from the corner of her eye and hastily dropped her hands into her lap, letting her dull-gray skirt envelop them.

Mr. Lodge opened his eyes. "Miss Southeil," he repeated. "Of all the journeys present, I might have expected this egregious misstep from anyone else. But not from you."

Evie bit her lip, trying to prevent the knot in her stomach from bringing up actual food onto Mr. Lodge's manuscript-filled desk—manuscripts she had nurtured into books to be published and read and devoured by the hungry readers of historical fiction. Even among the

handful of journey-rank editors at Hanhat Publishing, Evie was special. She knew she had the gift of turning rough sentences into delightful bouquets for the eyes, and yet here she was. Quivering in her boss's office. Oh, how she had messed up.

Mr. Lodge removed one manuscript from the pile and placed it directly underneath the damning newspaper. Evie stared at it, trying to will away the blasted thing's existence.

He tapped the stack of papers with an inky finger. "*How* did you let this come to pass? Our competitors are *breathing* down our backs, eager for any hint of weakness, and you give them the scoop of the year!"

"I-I'm sorry, Mr. Lodge," Evie whispered, ducking her chin to prevent tears from escaping. It *wasn't* her fault. Well, it *was*, but it *wasn't*. "I won't —"

"You're damn right you won't!" Mr. Lodge slammed his hand onto the table.

Evie squeaked, jumping in her seat.

He reeled in his anger, grimacing at the appendage as though alarmed that such an outburst had come from his body. He heaved another sigh. "Forgive me, but you know as well as I that Mr. Cabot's novel was to be the highlight of our publishing year. Having the plot...splattered across the gossip rags is an embarrassment to the company and the Guild."

Evie wanted to curl up inside herself until she became nothing more than a ball of gray cloth, hidden from the world.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, blinking furiously.

Mr. Lodge's face softened as did his voice. "Evie, I'm not going to fire you."

She lifted her head, hopeful.

“You’re the best assistant editor I’ve had in years, but I think this promotion came too fast, too soon.” He shook his head sadly. “But it’s no use having you here waiting for this whole scandal to blow over. It’ll harm the company’s reputation, and to have your face associated with this whole thing...” He paused, staring at her until she lifted her head. She tried to meet his gaze and failed. Eye contact had always been a struggle for her. “I’m sending you away,” he declared.

With her head bowed, Evie nodded. “I’ll clear my desk and head to the printers’ office.” The printers’ office was located five blocks away in the factory district. Dark, dingy, labor-intensive, and where Hanhat Publishing usually sent their screw-ups for menial labor.

“No, Evie.” She looked up, startled. “It’s going to be farther than that. I’ve reassigned you to the Librarian’s Guild.”

Evie’s heart lifted. At least she’d be near books. Near words and stories and *life*. Not confined to operating the massive printing machines, spending every minute in danger of getting an industrial injury. She blinked, realizing that she was still being sent away. Being transferred from one guild to another was hardly unique, but certainly not a common practice.

He went on. “Think of this as an opportunity, a chance to use your journey time to, well, *journey*.”

Journey? Evie wondered. Members of the Librarian’s Guild were stationed in every city, town, university, and village in Isten with a large enough population to support them, but they certainly did not travel.

“You’ll be part of the pack-horse librarians stationed in District Forty-five,” Mr. Lodge said. Obviously interpreting Evie’s miscomprehension as shock, he added, “This will be a two-year assignment. After that, you may return to Hanhat Publishing. I’ll always need copyeditors.”

“Th-thank you, Mr. Lodge,” Evie stuttered, lips moving automatically, mind still trying to figure out what had happened. Pack-horse librarians? Two years? And a *copyeditor*? She pressed her fingers to her lips, struggling to choke down bile and disappointment.

Her supervisor slid a folder across the table. It was depressingly thin. Mr. Lodge smiled, a mixture of kind and condescending that hurt worse than any of his words. “Someone will come by your flat to collect any remaining manuscripts. You’re dismissed.”

Evie rose from her chair to stand on legs she wasn’t certain would work and took the folder with shaking hands. She pressed the packet of papers to her stomach and bolted, bumping into her fellow journey, Anda, on her sprint to the bathroom. Once inside, she emptied the contents of her breakfast, along with the entirety of her previous life, into the toilet.

Someone knocked softly on the bathroom door, interrupting Evie’s hundredth heave.

“Evie?” The voice was hesitant.

“One minute.” Evie wiped her mouth and ran cold water over her wrists and face, trying to fight the nausea. She avoided the mirror above the sink. Her eyes were surely red and puffy, her dark skin sallow and splotchy. She didn’t need a mirror for that information.

She opened the door, nearly jumping as her girlfriend Anda burst inside and locked the door behind her. “Evie, I just heard, and I’m so sorry!” She tried to wrap her arms around Evie in a hug.

Evie pushed her away, staring into the face of the girl she had loved so fiercely until that moment in Mr. Lodge’s office. “How *could* you?” she demanded.

Anda’s eyes widened innocently. “Whatever do you mean?” she asked, placing a hand on her chest.

Rage bubbled in Evie's chest, replacing the nausea and sickness. "I let you review that manuscript in *confidence*, Anda," she hissed, "to help you polish your editing skills."

If possible, Anda's eyes opened wider. "Evie," she cooed, "I gave that manuscript back to you a week ago. You must have misplaced it. You know how forgetful you are."

Evie shook her head. Tears continued streaking down her cheeks, and she wiped them off vigorously with her sleeve, her fist clenched tightly.

The story had broken the night before, and since Evie had first found out about it as she entered the building for work that morning, she'd had the sinking suspicion that Anda was behind her situation. Evie was allowed to take manuscripts home and help smooth them over, but only with the explicit understanding that *no one else* could review an author's latest creation.

"I returned that manuscript to Mr. Lodge a week ago. Besides me, no one but *you* had hands on it."

Anda lips twisted in a facsimile of a smile. There was something predatory in her gaze, which Evie had seen her deliver to their fellow apprentices and journeys but never to *her*.

"Evie, dear, you know it wasn't me. Just accept responsibility and take your punishment at the pressman's office." She bit her lip and looked down, fluttering her eyelashes. The predatory gleam disappeared, replaced by the image of a remorseful girl. "I think that, with all this in mind, we shouldn't be together anymore." Her eyelashes fluttered again. "I mean, an assistant editor with a disgraced pressman? That would taint my career."

Evie gasped, tears beginning to spill out again. Anda's betrayal was worse than anything she had ever anticipated, but to end their four-year relationship so... callously... was something else.

“I can’t believe you,” she whispered. “I knew you were ambitious, but —”

The remorse vanished, and Anda was replaced by a hardened creature Evie had never seen before.

“But what? I’ve been here *eight* years, Evie. Do you know how hard *I’ve* worked only to be passed up by a girl who *just* got promoted to journey? This position is *my* due. Not yours.” She sniffed. “And clearly you don’t have the maturity to handle such a job.”

Evie placed a hand over her mouth, trying to stuff her sobs back down her throat as Anda threw open the door and stormed out.

Tears overwhelmed Evie’s senses as she slid down the wall and hit the tiled floor. This was so, so much worse than she had ever imagined. She’d lost her job, been betrayed by her girlfriend, and was being sent away in disgrace.

How would she tell her parents?

25th of Antis, 204th Year of the Diamond

Atakana was the last stop of the North East Train Line.

From the station's wooden platform, Evie couldn't see much of the town beyond the rail's empty cars and the piles of coal, gravel, and other bits of rock carted from the mines. If she squinted, she could make out the mountains—faint blue smudges in the distance—although one of the overly helpful conductors had informed her that these were merely the *foothills* to the Tartas Mountains.

Tightening her grip on her two suitcases, she trudged forward toward the train station. Already the hot summer sun beat down on her, and sweat poured from her body. Her head throbbed, and her ears had been popping from elevation changes since the stop at Ruwenzoni. Her entire body was gritty and dusty and certainly not fit for polite company, but she had no choice but to continue.

At her feet, Theodosia meowed and strained at the end of her leash. *At least someone isn't affected by all this openness and elevation*, Evie thought grumpily. She let the little gray cat roam as she adjusted the sling carrying Mathilde, Theodosia's two-month-old kitten.

As Evie entered the train station, a bell jingled. The station was cramped and hotter inside than outside. It was also dark, despite the grimy windows pushed open to let in air and light, and the lanterns struggled to illuminate the gloomy room.

Evie dropped her suitcases and heaved a sigh as she wiped sweat from her brow. Why had she packed so many books?

“Well?” a gruff voice called. It was thickly accented, so far from the crisp and clean enunciation of Carus that Evie winced. “What do you want?”

A short, thin man in a North East Train Line uniform popped his head out over the counter. He had been either sitting or lying down on the floor, probably attempting to get cooler. Behind him on a chalkboard, rates for train rides and telegrams were written in a shaky hand instead of the crisp and clean printed signs the other stations had boasted.

“I was—” Evie squeaked and snapped her mouth shut. She closed her eyes tightly as the man drummed his fingers on the counter. She took three quick, deep inhales and tried again.

“I was hoping to send a telegram to the pack-horse librarian district head. They were supposed to pick me up, but the train was delayed.” She trailed off as the man stared at her with an odd look on his face. “Yes?” she asked, weakly.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “No need to send a telegram. The guild’s distribution center is five blocks away. Take Gavis down to Rockfer, make a left and then another onto Hlaffin. It’ll be on your left.”

At Evie’s blank expression, he huffed in exasperation. “Do you want me to write it down?”

*

Thirty minutes, two wrong turns, and a strained shoulder later, Evie stood in front of district forty-five’s Pack-Horse Librarian Distribution Center. Her arms were practically shaking from the effort of carrying her bags. She should have gotten stronger from having to lug them up and down the train stations for the past twelve days.

She caught a reflection of herself in one of the dusty windows of the wide wooden building and groaned. Her dark-brown skin was flushed even deeper from sun and physical strain, and her coppery-orange hair had unraveled from underneath her straw hat. Her dark-gray bolero and skirt were rumpled from travel, and the stains of several meals on the ruffled front marred her once-white linen shirtwaist. Worse, her low-heeled button boots—a luxury Anda had insisted she buy despite her meager assistant editor’s pay—had pinched her toes into pained submission.

Theodosia finished sniffing the dirt before them and rubbed herself against Evie’s skirts, leaving a smear of gray hair that only added to her dishevelment. The cat meowed.

“I know, I know. I should get to it,” Evie muttered. She straightened her shoulders and raised her hand to knock.

Before her fist landed on the wooden door, a tall lean woman with a weather-beaten face yanked it open.

“Are you going to stand there all day?” She tempered the harshness of her words with a grin that revealed two missing teeth. “You must be Ever Southell, the new carrier. I thought they mentioned that babes aren’t allowed?”

“Babes?” Evie asked.

The woman pointed at her chest.

Evie glanced down where Mathilde was wiggling into wakefulness at last. “Oh! This is Mathilde, my um...kitten. Well, *her* kitten.” She gestured to the meowling Theodosia. A muscle screamed in pain, and she winced, gathering her suitcases more firmly with clammy hands.

“Let me take that,” the woman said, grabbing the handle of the suitcase from on Evie’s bad arm. The handle attempted to stick to Evie’s skin. “Oof, this is heavy. What do you have in there? Bricks?”

“Books.”

The woman laughed. “Of course.” Belying her words about the weight, she easily swung the case over her shoulder. “Follow me. Librarian Petøfiné has been waiting for you to come in. I’m Reká, the assistant librarian.”

Librarian Petøfiné was as tall and sparse as Reká, but little amusement shone in her expression. She wore the same outfit as Reká: a rough-spun white shirtwaist with a navy bolero and brown bottoms bunched at her hips. Evie had thought the bottoms were skirts, but they turned out to be pants like those her brother wore when working the stables as a livery. Calf-high laced boots completed the picture, along with tightly coiffed hair, a no-nonsense face, and a bronze open-book pin with a star that signified her librarian’s rank.

Petøfiné gave Evie a once-over, far more intense and less welcoming than the one Reká had given her. Evie became conscious once again of every single wrinkle and smear of her ink-stained fingers and sleeves, her unruly hair, and the way her clothing strained at the seams. The train meals had been free and hearty, and Evie had tried to soothe her heartbreak the same way she always did—with food.

“Hmph.” Petøfiné raised her eyebrow at Theodosia. Her second eyebrow joined the first as she took in Mathilde, now squeaking with hunger against Evie’s chest. “Can you ride a horse?”

“A what?” Evie asked, startled by the question.

“A horse,” the librarian repeated deliberately. “Four legs, tall, hairy?”

Evie’s older brother Egbert had taken her to the military stable where he was apprenticed and let her sit on a couple of the palfreys. Once, he had even let her ride one as he cooled the horse down after a hunting hack. The creature had been panting and slick with sweat. Evie had been terrified

being so high up from the ground. The thought of repeating the experience was horrifying.

“Um, somewhat?” she replied.

The librarian sighed. “Well, you’ll learn. Zsigmond is finishing up his two-year stint at Hevis, and I don’t have a need for another clerk. I *need* a carrier. Can you read and write?” Her accent was less pronounced than either Reká’s or the porter, a mixture of enunciated education and rough mountain.

Evie straightened her spine. “Of course.”

“Ancestors, you even *sound* soft.” The librarian rolled her eyes. “Reká, get her settled. With a uniform that *fits*. And make sure those *creatures* of hers are contained. I don’t want them roaming around.” She glanced at Evie, then her bags. “Whatever you have in there, be prepared to pare everything down to one suitcase. Carriers travel light.”

“But—” Evie protested, as Reká interjected, “She says she has *books*.”

For the first time, Petøfiné seemed interested. “Books, hm? Well, get her settled, and we’ll see if there’s anything in there that can be used.”

*

Later that night, Evie thumped onto the cot in the spare room she had been given to sleep in. Theodosia squeaked irritably at the movement and turned on the lone pillow until her gray rump faced Evie, tail thumping in disapproval. Mathilde, meanwhile, staggered toward Evie, then nosed her for a couple treats.

According to Reká, inbound carriers shared the main bunkroom, but a couple of the resting riders were allergic to cats. Separate accommodations had to be made.

Evie stared glumly at the tiny room. It was barely large enough for a cot, and she’d had to stack her two suitcases on top of each other so that

she could close the door. Tears threatened to bubble up to the surface, but she brushed her face angrily and went to the top suitcase to pull out a chew-strip for Mathilde, who batted at it eagerly.

Underneath the tiny bag of chewies and good luck charms from her mother lay Evie's other disappointment. The books she'd brought had been restuffed into the suitcase by Librarian Petøfiné with a disgusted scoff, stating that no one wanted to read *those* types of books.

Evie took one out, fingering the soft cover as she opened a page of colored pictures interspersed with heavy text. She'd scrimped and saved for weeks to earn enough dinnies to purchase this book as a child, and it was her *favorite*.

Mr. Lodge had sent someone to collect all of her remaining manuscripts—led by Anda and Elsabetty, one of Anda's favorite copyeditors—and they had collected all the Hanhat Publisher's books they found, even those Evie had purchased herself. Fortunately, Anda's spite didn't extend to Evie's children's books.

Evie smiled sadly, stroking the spine of *The City Mouse Goes to the Library* before gently setting the book aside.

She removed the second book and opened to a random page. A fierce white dragon bared its teeth and breathed blue fire onto a knight's shield as the knight struggled to protect herself and her valiant steed.

After sparing a glance at Theodosia, who remained facing the wall in studied protest of their meager housing, Evie settled to the ground. She rested her back against the cot and tucked her legs to avoid bumping them against the wall. Mathilde jumped into her lap, then gnawed at her chewie with vicious kitten teeth.

Laying the book onto the floor, Evie summoned the core of her magic, pulling the words from the text and shaping them into images, floating

above the page, turning into a living picture of the story. Blue magic swirled about the image as the knight shook her sword at the dragon. Evie's exhaustion and sadness slipped away as the three battled ferociously, and she lost herself in the familiar story. The weight that had pressed down on her since entering Mr. Lodge's office two weeks ago eased a fraction.

Anda might have broken her heart and stolen her job, but she had never known Evie's secret. No one did, save her immediate family. Her mother, a hedge witch, had wanted to send her daughter to magic school to become an accomplished mage, but Evie had panicked at the thought of being *noticed*—she couldn't even light a candle without a match or fix a shattered pot with the snap of her fingers. Magic schools were notoriously rigorous and competitive, and Evie's magic was rare but one-dimensional. And it followed her passion.

So, Evie had kept her book magic quiet, careful, and hidden, finding delight in bringing books to life. It had helped, sometimes, to animate the words on the page when reading the richly intricate historical fiction Hanhat was famous for—and she easily identified gaps in the story flow and continuity issues with her magic. Her skill was the reason she had risen so fast and why Mr. Lodge had allowed her to take the manuscripts home—he didn't know how she did what she did, only that the book always returned indescribably better.

By the end of the battle, Evie's chin rested on her chest, and her eyes struggled to remain open. With effort, she pulled herself onto the cot, gently eased Theodosia to the other side of the pillow, and fell asleep with Mathilde purring against her cheek.

30th of Antis, 204th Year of the Diamond

“So where are you from?” Reká asked.

Evie shifted again as the wagon hit a bump and tried to send her tailbone between her shoulder blades. Luckily—or unluckily—for her, the latest book distribution to the northern depots had been scheduled two days after her arrival. She’d had a whirlwind introduction to the rest of the Atakana distribution center before she helped Reká load the wagon. Then they were off and away on the three-day trip to Hevis.

“Carus,” Evie repeated for what felt like the millionth time but was probably only the third or fourth. She wondered why Reká was asking this again as she leaned over the bench seat to make sure her suitcases were still intact. Despite Petøfiné’s threats, she hadn’t tossed anything. Reká had made room in the wagon and had even argued that Evie’s books might prove helpful.

They hit another bump, and Evie winced. Mathilde yowled pitifully from her chest sling. “Are the roads always like this?”

Reká laughed. “Be thankful there *are* roads. Past Hevis, you’re lucky to find a trail.”

“And how much further?”

“Another day and we’ll be there. You’ll like it; we’re camping under the stars tonight.”

Evie drooped. This was the second day on the road, and she was done with traveling. Riding in a wagon was far more taxing than the gentle

swaying of a train car. Between the dusty dirt road, the heat, and the bugs, she just wanted to go home.

“So, Carus,” Reká mused.

Evie bit back a groan. Reká had peppered Evie with questions about Isten’s capitol for the entire trip, wanting to know all about the food, the culture, the districts, the university, and the publishing guild.

For the past day and a half, Evie had talked until her throat was raw. Reká hadn’t let up with her questions until Evie had told her more about the home she’d left behind than she had learned about where she was going. At least Reká was easy to talk to and wasn’t intimidating like Librarian Petøfiné or the other clerks at the distribution center.

Before Reká had asked her more questions, a hawk swooped low, wings and claws extended in attack.

Evie shrieked in alarm and lunged for the safety of the wagon bed, cradling Mathilde protectively. Reká laughed and pointed overhead, finger following the hawk as it settled onto a branch and pensively watched them.

“It won’t hurt you,” she assured Evie. “You might want to watch out for your big kitty though.”

Theodosia, sensing someone was talking about her, lifted her head, hissed idly at both Reká and the hawk, and slunk underneath the wagon’s seat to curl onto Evie’s discarded jacket.

“Why did you get sent here?” Reká asked abruptly.

Evie’s shoulders lifted defensively as she huddled into herself. Reká had avoided asking her about the chain of events that had led to an assistant editor being exiled to the very edge of Isten, but the interrogation had always been coming.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“All right.” Reká tapped her fingers on her thigh. Her foot jiggled. “So, back to what I was asking before: where are you *really* from? Like, your family *before* they came to Carus?”

“What do you mean?” Evie asked, struggling to keep up with the change in topic.

Reká turned her head so she faced Evie, eyebrow cocked. “Well, most people around here have olive or white skin, and isn’t that more of the same in Carus?” Evie shrugged. Reká tried another line of attack. “So... your skin is dark. And I’ve never seen hair like that before. Can I touch it?”

“No!”

“Sorry.” Reká returned her focus to the trail and resumed her foot tapping. She didn’t appear offended.

“Sorry,” Evie offered after a while. “I don’t like people touching my hair.” She stared about them at the hills sloping up onto either side, craggy and ominous, at the trees, the yellow grass—anything but Reká. “My family is from south Isten. Near Estril, I think.” She shrugged. “We’ve lived in Carus since my great-great-grandfather moved up here. Carus is home.”

She paused. Carus was a melting pot of all shapes, sizes, and skin and hair colors where anything and everything was possible. The capitol represented everything Isten was and would be. Evie frowned. She hadn’t seen anyone who looked like her since at least Ruwenzoni. And certainly no one with the upper-middle-class Carus accent she had adopted to fit in with the Hanhat copyedit apprentices and authors.

“It’s amazing that Isten has so many different cultures,” Reká said, breaking the silence. “You’re lucky to have lived in Carus. Me, I’ve lived

in these mountains as long as I've been alive. The farthest I've been was Ruwenzoni for a horse fair."

"This is the farthest from home I've been *ever*," Evie whispered. "I've never left Carus until now." Before her apprenticeship with Hanhat, she'd never even left her neighborhood.

"Never?" Reká exclaimed. "Poor little city mouse! This must be terrifying for you."

"It *is* kinda terrible."

Reká clapped her on the shoulder, careful not to jostle Mathilde. "You'll get used to it. I promise."

"Doubtful," Evie muttered. Luckily, her words were swallowed up by another pothole.

1st of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

The woods were so quiet during the day, so removed from the steady city sounds of yelling and horses and people and trams and horse-drawn cabbies and the sights and noise of a million people living in a very small space.

But the night...Evie shuddered in remembrance and peeked at the sky to make sure that the sun was still high in the air. At night, every creature in the universe crawled around the wagon to perform an opera of howls, chirps, and disconcerting screams. Each rustle in the underbrush had her convinced that it was a bear or mountain lion—all terrifying things that existed in abundance here. She hadn't slept at all and was amazed that Reká snored blissfully through the cacophony of the hunting songs of creatures waiting to eat them.

The closer they drew to Hevis, the further civilization receded. The trees grew larger, crowding into the narrowing rock and dirt trail as the wagon bumped along, towering until they blocked out the sky.

They had gotten through the worst of the huge hills the previous afternoon, traveling between or around or sometimes along a road that was carved into the literal stone and so narrow Evie had been afraid to open her eyes in case they were actually riding on air.

When Evie had called them mountains, Reká had only laughed and explained that these were mere foothills. Real mountains, apparently, had snow on them *year-round*. Evie had only seen snow once when a rare ice

storm had moved through Carus one winter. She couldn't imagine something that cold lasting an entire year.

"Ah, here we are," Reká said, directing the horses down a rutted path. The wagon bounced, jolting Evie out of her thoughts.

The longer they drove, the more a loud clanging echoed throughout the hills. She twisted about in her seat, struggling to identify the source of the noise. Everything was still and quiet and dark, save for the noise.

"It must be a pick machine," Reká commented, responding to Evie's unspoken question. "They're probably opening a new pit head somewhere or deepening a shallow shaft." At Evie's blank look, she added, "Hevis is a bituminous coal mine. Didn't you know that?" Evie shook her head. Reká gave a soft laugh. "Didn't you see all the coal dust coating everything?"

Evie looked at the trees, the undergrowth, the grass, and the dark dirt path. Everything had a covering of black soot and a wilted look, but she attributed it to her own droopy state.

The wagon pulled around a corner and into a vast clearing.

Evie stared in astonishment. Tree stumps stretched for furlongs in either direction. Tiny wooden houses clustered together in tight rows on a flattened section in the middle of the clearing.

In the far distance, a large wooden structure sat on top of a denuded hill, looking like an evil demon guarding its prey. A line of people, tiny wagons and tinier horse things scrunched up in a line stretching down the hill to dump their black payloads into larger wagons before marching up the hill once again.

"I thought the trains didn't come to Hevis?" Evie pointed at the rows of train cars at the base of the hill. The process of train cars being filled with coal was mesmerizing.

“That rail only hauls coal and company folk,” Reká replied. “We took the back way.”

She pulled on the reins, directing the horses away from the hill and toward the very middle of the small mining town to three buildings that were slightly larger than the houses.

Reká pointed to the largest building. “That’s the company store owned by Keppitite Mining. They provide all the food and supplies for the people of Hevis—docked from the colliers’ wages. The building next to it is the cafeteria. Most of the colliers and their families do communal cooking. The other building is the schoolhouse for children under eleven.”

Evie frowned. While Isten dictated that all children aged three to eleven attend school to learn the basics in math, reading, geography, and history, twelve was the usual time for children to begin apprenticeships or obtain higher education.

“What about the older—”

“The mines,” Reká interrupted, her usually cheery voice flat.

Evie gasped. “But child—”

Reká shot Evie a look, shutting her up. “Labor laws don’t exist out here, not when each family is scrounging for every pensie they can earn. Remember that it’s not as easy out here as it is in Carus.”

Evie opened her mouth to rebut that statement but paused. *She* might have had to miss a few meals here and there, but she had never starved or had to work hard, physical labor for all hours of the day. Editing was taxing, but the worse she suffered was a tight back, cramped hands, and strained eyes.

“Where’s the library?” she asked, deciding to change the subject instead of address the uncomfortable.

“The station is behind the school,” Reká replied. “We’re late enough in the afternoon that most of the children will be out of class and helping their parents.” She grinned. “I timed it so that we wouldn’t have them jumping all over us. They like the stories.”

The library station was a large room tacked haphazardly onto the back of the school. Its white-washed walls were nearly black from the dust that lingered in the air, and Evie nearly missed the black dog that lifted out of the ground before the door to the station to lope lazily toward them, barking with a mouth too wide for its face.

“Shuddup, Anthie!” Reká yelled, pulling up the horses in front of the building before jumping down. The dog ignored her and kept barking. Woken from her slumber, Theodosia unrolled herself from under the seat and jumped up beside Evie, who was too scared to get down and face the monster.

Upon sight of the cat, the dog went wild, hopping and barking and circling frantically as it tried to jump into the wagon. Theodosia hissed, teeth bared, and face scrunched like a Bytarroain cobra. The dog jumped, catching the footrest and scrambling up near Evie’s feet. She shrieked and leapt out of the wagon, but missed the landing and fell, skinning her knees as she hit the hard-packed dirt.

Theodosia jumped too, however, *she* lunged for the dog, slicing its nose with a wicked claw. The dog yelped and dove from the wagon before running away from the triumphant cat.

Theodosia sat down on the wagon seat and licked her paw daintily.

“Dammit, Anthie!” a woman shouted, barreling out of the station as the dog shot around the corner. She nearly tripped over him as he went, cursing furiously as she straightened. Then she noticed Reká and the

wagon and gave a whoop of joy. “Reká! Right on time! What did you bring?”

“The usual.” Reká’s eyes twinkled. The women embraced, and the stranger’s gaze fell on Evie, who was pushing herself off the ground and trying to brush off her now-blackened knees.

“Is that—?” the woman asked, hesitantly.

Evie looked up, panicking at the change in tone.

Reká plastered a wide smile on her face and announced, “Agatha, this is your new carrier, Evie Southeil. She’s from Carus. Evie, this is Station Head Molnar—”

“Just Agatha, please.” Agatha looked her new carrier up and down, dubiously. “Carus, right? Can you even ride a horse?”

“A little.” Evie lifted her chin. Her head dropped as her courage deserted her. She wished she still wore her skirts so she could hide her hands. As it was, she found herself twisting them together in front of her as her shoulders hunched forward. “I can learn.”

Theodosia gave a loud yeowl, causing the dog to whimper and slink further away.

At Agatha’s raised eyebrow, Reká drily explained, “*That* is Her Royal Majesty, Queen Theodosia.” The monarch in question merely raised her head and sniffed in acknowledgment at being recognized at last. “She came with Evie.”

“Oh good,” Agatha exclaimed. “We don’t have many cats here. She’ll help with the rat problem.”

Theodosia snapped her head toward the woman and, very deliberately, turned until her back was facing the station head. She began grooming herself, one leg lifted high into the air.

“She’s a bit finicky,” Reká explained.

Agatha *hmmmed* in agreement, eyes wide.

Evie pinched her lips together, trying to conceal her amusement.

Reká continued, “Luckily, Mathilde is more amiable.”

Evie pulled the tiny kitten from her sling and let Agatha coo over the baby, who happily gnawed her fingers.

“Well, welcome,” Agatha said, straightening after giving Mathilde one final tickle. “Let’s unload this wagon so you can come inside, get out of the dust, and see the station.”

The inside of the station was filled with stacks and stacks of books with a door directly opposite the entrance that Evie assumed led into the school. Two desks made from wood slabs and stumps were crammed side by side, filled with piles of paper and more books. The pale wood floor was streaked dark by the coal ash that was *everywhere* in Hevis.

A skinny person wearing the standard librarian uniform of white shirt and brown pants with the addition of a brilliantly pink scarf, spiky brown hair and light-brown skin, sprang up from behind the desk to help.

Evie dropped her two cartons of books where Agatha indicated and turned to get her suitcases as Reká trundled inside with more crates of books.

“I’m going to head to the librarian stables.” Reká pointed toward the building, explaining, “That’s where the carriers stay. I’ll drop your things off there.”

The other librarian banged inside behind Reká, dumping the last of the books off with a grunt. “Woof, that’s heavy,” they muttered, gently sliding a finger underneath one of the bindings to peek inside. “Primers. *Great.*”

They perked up when Theodosia appeared, winding herself around their legs with a purr that threatened to shake apart the tiny building. “And who are you, precious?” they cooed, lifting her up and cuddling her against

their chest. Amazingly, Theodosia's purr only deepened. Their eyes met Evie's with a welcoming grin.

"You must be the new girl."

"Evie." Evie wondered if all carriers and librarians were rail-thin and filled with confidence. She willed herself upright. It would not do to crumple into a ball of shyness before her new supervisor and coworkers, no matter how out of place she felt.

"Csaba." Theodosia smacked their face with a paw, and the librarian set her down and brushed the cat hair from their shirt. "I'm one of the carriers here."

"Evie is from Carus," Agatha explained, dropping into a chair behind one of the desks. She fiddled with a pencil absently before setting it back down. "Sit." She gestured toward a tree-stump stool in one of the corners. It had a folded quilt as a pillow, and Evie carefully sat. "Sorry we don't have better accommodations. The stools are cheap and useful in such a small space."

Csaba snorted. "The stools are *free*, and no wonder." They sank into their own chair, fingers twitching before they found a book with a torn spine and mended it with tape and glue. "Just like everything else around here." The sarcasm in their voice was thick enough for Evie to cut.

"Quiet," Agatha warned, voice low. There was no censorship in her tone. She cocked her head, taking in Evie even more. "What exactly did you do in Carus before coming here? The letter wasn't clear."

"I was an assistant editor with Hanhat Publishing."

Csaba paused, two strands of tape stuck to their fingers. "The *Publisher's Guild*?" they asked. "What in ash are you doing *here*?"

Evie had no reason to lie. She'd be spending the next two years with these people, and she was bound to slip up if she lied. Besides, as Anda

had told her time and time again with increasing exasperation when she tried to teach her cards, Evie had a too-honest face.

Staring down at her coal-smudged boots, she muttered, “I let my girlfriend look at a secret manuscript, and she leaked it to the press.”

Csaba whistled, low through their teeth.

“Well, *ex-girlfriend*,” Evie clarified, face heating. “She dumped me after she was promoted to my position.”

Agatha grunted in sympathy. “Luckily for you, there’s not much that’s secret out here.” She smiled to take the sting from her words. “I like to think of us as family—”

“*Dysfunctional* family,” Csaba coughed, but Agatha ignored them.

“The Pack-Horse Librarians stick together.” The station head sighed. “Although, our schedules tend to involve one or two of us being on a route at any given time, so we’re not as together as I’d like. Since you’re due to replace Zsigmond, you’ll take over his route. You’ll accompany him the next time he rides out.”

Csaba’s lip quirked slightly at the other carrier’s name, but they remained focused on the book and didn’t offer any enlightening commentary.

At the mention of a route, Evie’s stomach knotted. She’d gotten bits and pieces of what carriers did from Reká, but aside from weeklong trips on horseback, Evie had no idea what the job entailed. Not knowing was nerve-racking.

Csaba finished taping the spine and blew on the glue to dry it faster. “One done.” They cast a side-eyed glance at the stack beside them. “And twenty to go.”

“Help me sort the new books,” Agatha told Evie before giving a quick rundown of the organizational process. As Evie organized, Agatha wrote

the titles and authors onto a notebook using what had to have been a kind of librarian shorthand. This wasn't the shorthand Evie had been taught at Hanhat. When Reká stomped in ten minutes later, she helped sort as well.

"Once we're done with this, we'll head to dinner," Agatha said. "We eat at the cafeteria like everyone else."

Evie stared, calculating how her meager carrier salary would cover meals.

Agatha's lips twisted. "Keppitite Mining subsidizes our lodging and board as a service to the Emperor."

"Never mind that *we* built our own library and stables," Csaba muttered. Even lower, they added, "And *still* have to pay rent for it."

Evie tried not to laugh. She might like this place, after all.

*

Dinner was a watery potato stew and hard biscuits that did nothing to soothe Evie's unsettled stomach. As she picked at the meager offerings and wished that the people of Hevis celebrated Ganijh, the Day of Fishes, she looked around at the colliers who shuffled into the cramped building.

All of them were hunched over and thin. Coal coated their clothing and bodies, save for gray patches on hands and faces where they had washed for dinner. She couldn't determine skin color; the coal made everyone the same grey and black. Patches of color popped up here and there from women who had wrapped their dusty hair in brilliant headscarves.

Their children weren't much better. The older ones were stunted and as coal-smeared and exhausted as their parents while the younger children had the lined faces of people forced to grow up too much, too fast. The only adults who didn't look like they worked in the mine were the most infirm of the elderly and those women with protruding stomachs.

“No pregnant women in the mines,” Csaba murmured, catching Evie’s stare. “Guild law.”

“Who watches the children while their parents work?” Evie asked.

Janos, the library station’s lone apprentice, leaned forward, eager to impart his wisdom. “Keppitite Mining has a crèche for the youngest children and offers parental leave for one parent for two months.” Janos’s lips twisted. At sixteen, he possessed the dark hair, olive skin and brown eyes that Evie recognized as Tartas Mountain standard. He had grown up in the area—his parents had been colliers before his mother had died of the coughing disease and his father started crèche work. “That’s not as much time as you’d think.”

“Roslyn does the teaching, which takes up a lot of the children’s day,” Agatha added, then spooned down another mouthful of soup. She swallowed and pulled a book out of her vest pocket for dinner reading. “The town is getting big enough to need another teacher, but I doubt the company—or the Guild—will fork out to hire another.”

Evie scanned the room, searching for a face that wasn’t lined with coal and premature age.

“She’s probably with Tundë, her fiancée,” Csaba explained. “You’ll meet Tundë tomorrow. She returned from a run last night.”

“Duh, with *me*,” Janos said. The snark was dampened by the dewy looks he shot toward a pretty girl across the cafeteria. She was about his age, serving bowls of soup to the colliers, and completely unaware of Janos’s besotted cow-eyes. Unlike the others, she wore a fashionable pale-pink ankle-length skirt and shirtwaist, and her hair was shiny and dust-free.

Csaba, who Evie realized was the station’s personality and happily single gossipmonger, whispered conspiratorially, “*That’s* Marja Magdolna,

Mr. Marja's only child. She's the heir to Keppitite Mining. When she had her coming out and transitioning party two years ago, her father gave everyone—us included—a *tanda* as a bonus." They shook their head at that lavish show of spending. With all the deductions for housing, food and healthcare, colliers probably only made one *tanda* a year. That bonus would have doubled their wages, which probably went right back into the company coffers. "Janos doesn't have a chance," Csaba added.

Evie nodded, stuck on both the raise *and* the girl. Magdolna was the perfect study of an upper-middle-class lady of breeding.

Janos whipped his head toward the journey. "Shuddup, Csaba."

"Aww, someone feeling insignificant?" Csaba teased. They turned to Evie. "Janos got dumped by his boyfriend last month." Their eyes cut slyly toward the younger person. "And how long did *that* relationship last?"

Janos's lips pursed in anger. "Agatha!" he pleaded, turning toward superiority for support.

Agatha had been studiously ignoring them and was reading her book as she ate. "Csaba, don't be giving our newest journey a bad impression of us." She didn't tear her eyes from the pages. Agatha's fascination made Evie's curiosity spike.

Csaba's gaze cut toward the book, and they reached over to lift the cover up with a delicate finger. "Ooooooh, the latest Rondine romance," they purred. "And how did we acquire that?"

Agatha ignored them, but Reká smirked. "You should try sweet-talking the distributor more, Csabbie." Reká returned to her own book. It was a thick historical fiction plucked from the library shelves. Evie recognized it as a Hanhat bestseller. This copy had heavily dog-eared pages and a battered cover that had been lovingly patched together. Evie hadn't seen

Reká with a book on their journey, but there hadn't been much time or much light for reading.

"You may have it *after* I'm finished," Agatha added, cutting off Csaba before they opened their mouth.

Evie focused again on the conversation, feeling eyes on her. Janos had peeled his attention from Magdolna and stared at her with an unreadable expression.

"What?" she asked him.

He frowned. "How old are you, again?"

Reká laughed and ruffled his hair. "Don't even try it."

"Eighteen," Evie replied.

Janos's eyes bulged as he ducked out of Reká's grasp. "*Eighteen* and you can't even ride, and you're a *journey*?" he exclaimed. He swiveled toward the station head. "Agatha!"

Agatha held up her spoon, her other hand pointing to a passage in her book. When she seemed to reach a stopping point, her finger pinned the pages in place. She replied levelly, "Evie's a transfer from another guild. Her rank stays."

Janos groaned.

Evie groaned too, even if hers was internal.

2nd of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

“This is a horse.” Csaba smacked the shoulder of a large brown-and-black horse with white spots on its legs and face. It gazed back at them and nibbled Csaba’s shoulder with whiskered lips. Evie gulped, catching sight of its large teeth. She’d seen horse teeth before, but they were still big and scary. Normally, the most she saw of a horse was its rump when it pulled a hackney cab or Mr. Lodge’s buggy.

“His name is Maple.”

The three of them stood in the corral outside the stables. Agatha had informed Evie that she was going to learn to ride a horse and tow a mule *immediately*. As her assigned mentor, Csaba was to show her how the pack-horse librarians did business in the mountains. Beginning, of course, with the horses. Evie could learn the rest of being a pack-horse librarian carrier later.

“Maple is a gelding.” Csaba pointed between the horse’s hind legs, and color rose in Evie’s cheeks. “That means he’s a boy with no balls.” They made a scissors motion with two fingers. Evie’s blush deepened. “All of our horses are either mares or geldings, except for our mules because those are sterile. The librarian’s guild breeds for endurance, hardiness, and patience. No live wires here.”

They gave a soft laugh.

Evie didn’t understand the joke, but she smiled out of expectation anyway.

Csaba clasped their hands together. They seemed to be relishing their self-appointed role as mentor and friend a tad too much. “All right, let’s show you how to tack him up and we’ll spend some time in the ring. Then I’ll teach you how to take care of him.”

Evie nodded weakly, wondering how in the worlds she was ever going to climb on top of something that huge. Maple’s shoulder—*wither*, Evie learned—was sixteen hands high.

Measuring horses was apparently different than measuring other things, but at least it was based on a similar principle to the Isten Standard of Measurement than something else entirely. “Think of it like a finger, but about a knuckle longer,” Csaba had explained.

However measured, Maple was huge.

*

Evie ran the pitchfork along the dirt-packed stall, scraping up the last of the round balls of horse waste that had collected in the corner of the stall. After her riding lesson, Csaba had tasked her to clean out the stalls in the librarian stable, directing her to use a wheelbarrow and pitchfork.

Every muscle in her body ached—most of which she had never realized she had. Her inner thighs were bow-legged and cramped after trying to stay on Maple’s wide back. Her butt was aching from the combination of the wagon journey and bouncing about in the hard saddle, and her hands were blistering up again from the wooden handle.

“Who did you piss off?” someone asked from behind her.

Evie squeaked and jumped, whirling about and tripping over the pitchfork. Luckily, she was able to save herself by putting a hand against the low stall divider. A blister pressed and popped, oozing puss down her palm. She hastily withdrew the hand, hissing in pain.

Janos leaned over the divider, a curious look on his face. “You okay?” he asked. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m fine,” Evie replied. She held up her hand. “Only a blister.”

Janos hissed in sympathy. “That looks terrible.” He stepped into the stall, which was thankfully vacant since all of the horses and mules were in the corrals. “Let me finish up.” He took hold of the pitchfork and tried to tug it away.

Evie’s fingers tightened about the handle. “But Csaba—”

Janos gave her a withering glare. “When Csaba sees the mess you’ve made of your hands, they’ll understand. In fact, they’ll probably kick themselves for not giving you gloves.”

She couldn’t argue with that logic even if she was the biggest wimp in the history of weaklings. She couldn’t even get through a simple task without hurting herself. With a sigh, Evie limped toward the corrals where Csaba worked with a couple of the horses.

“Finished already?” Csaba asked. They were on top of one of the horses and towing a mule behind them.

“Um.”

Csaba rode closer, the mule following. Evie held up her hands.

Csaba made the same hissing noise Janos had and shot her a glare. “Why didn’t you stop before it got this bad?”

“I—you said—”

Csaba cut her off. “I understand.” They dismounted, dropping both sets of reins to the ground before swinging between two of the corral rails with fluid grace. When they got to Evie, they pushed her toward the stable once again. “Let’s get those cleaned up. Then we’ll work on your seat. You don’t need hands for that!”

Evie bit back a groan in dismay. More horses.

6th of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

Sweat was already collecting under Evie's armpits, and the sun hadn't even risen.

Part of her sweat was anticipation, the rest hard labor as she helped Zsigmond tack horses and packmules with book-bags, clothing rolls, and supplies for the trip into the mountains.

A stomach-full of snakes roiled in Evie's belly in anticipation of a week on the trails. In addition to the riding, she'd be spending the time with Zsigmond, who had returned from his run three days ago, and was displeased he'd have to ride out with his replacement instead of traveling to his new assignment at the University of Ruwenzoni.

Zsigmond was a mystery. Objectively attractive with the high forehead, sharp cheekbones, even complexion, and tousled black hair that would have sent the copy-pool apprentices swooning in delight, he had a temperament that was drastically different when his superiors were present. He lavished attention on Evie when Agatha was nearby, but as soon as the station head was gone, he returned to treating her with a kind of distant unpleasantness. Evie was not looking forward to this journey.

Agatha finished up her inspection of Evie's equipment. "Well, you've got everything you need." She smiled reassuringly, no doubt catching Evie's fished-eyed look of fear. "Relax. Zsigmond will be with you every step of the way."

Evie mirrored the expression with none of Agatha's confidence. As Agatha turned to give Zsigmond the last of her instructions, Csaba, who

had woken up early to see them off, leaned toward Evie.

“Watch him,” they whispered.

Evie’s eyes snapped toward Csaba’s, but Csaba was eyeing Zsigmond pensively.

They carefully unwrapped their scarf, a dark-blue-and-white-patterned thing, and tucked it around Evie’s neck. “For luck.” They patted Evie on the shoulder. “It’s a traditional Tartas design unique to the Atakana area. It should help.”

“Thanks,” Evie replied, drawing a finger along the scarf. A pleasant buzz spread from her fingers to wrist. A good luck charm—a powerful one—had been inlaid into the stitching. Her smile grew more genuine.

“Tundë made it,” Csaba said, answering Evie’s unspoken question. “She’s a hedge witch.” Evie hadn’t worked much with her fellow journey, who spent most of her week in the classroom helping Roslyn with the children and her off-hours making eyes at Roslyn. At dinner, they were practically one person and reminded Evie too sharply of what she had had with Anda.

The thought of her ex-girlfriend made her stomach churn. Aside from her initial explanation for being reassigned, Evie hadn’t spoken of Anda again, but her mind kept replaying their relationship, trying to find the signs—any sign—why Anda had done what she did. She hadn’t even told Csaba, who had transitioned from sarcastic mentor to sarcastic friend in the short time since Evie’s arrival. She tucked the scarf tighter about her neck. Csaba pretended to be gruff, but they cared.

“Ready?” Zsigmond’s voice cut through the darkness of the predawn, overly bright and chipper.

Evie nodded, trying to copy his graceful leap into the saddle. Her leg barely made it into the stirrup as the mare shifted her hindquarters,

swinging out of reach.

Evie fell to the ground with a thump, bottom landing heavily on the ground. Tears pricked her eyes at the stifled giggles of her coworkers. Agatha grabbed the horse's head-harness—*bridle*, Evie corrected—while Csaba helped her to her feet and knelt down, forming a cup with their hands.

“I’ll boost you.”

“Okay.” Evie stuck her foot into Csaba’s hands and gripped the saddle horn. After some heavy pushing and grunting on the parts of booster and boosted, Evie made it into the saddle, red-faced and scrunching in shame. She’d struggled throughout most of her rapid training, but there had always been a mounting block nearby to help her up. This horse was shorter than Maple, but a lot wigglier. Evie had wanted Maple, but this horse knew the route and Maple didn’t, and that was that.

Csaba took the reins from Agatha and handed them to Evie, patting her knee with a hand. “Find a stump, or a big rock, or a fence to help you up while you’re out there,” they murmured. There was no trace of mockery in their voice. “You’ll get used to it.”

Evie bit her lower lip, batting her eyelids furiously to hold in the tears. “Take care of my cats, please.”

“Of course,” Csaba replied. They had already promised they would, but their reassurance eased some of the tightness in Evie’s chest. It was good to have a friend and ally.

“Hurry up,” Zsigmond said, his careful tone slipping with impatience. He gave Agatha a half-salute and nudged his gelding forward, the packmule trotting along behind them to keep up.

With a lurch, Evie’s horse began walking. She gripped the saddle horn tightly in one hand, swaying with each step.

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They arrived at the first house three hours later.

Evie had been focused on staying in the saddle and not falling off, so she hadn't paid much attention as they left the ash-coated valley and climbed into the bramble- and tree-filled mountains once again. All she remembered was going along a narrow trail barely wide enough for two horses abreast before cutting down a dry creek bed.

Zsigmond hadn't spoken a word to her the entire time.

The house was a simple cabin made of bark-covered logs. It was surrounded by a barren field filled with stumps and dirt with a tiny garden in the front and a larger field behind. Two people were in the field pushing a big stump out of the way with a large, cow-like creature. Children ran about the front of the house, conducting various chores amid a gaggle of chickens.

Once they spotted the librarians, the children all squealed and raced toward the horses. The two figures in the field paused, turning to see what the commotion was all about, and continued their work.

"Librarian Lidiga!" the tallest child yelled, a bright grin beaming on their face. They appeared to be twelve or thirteen, likely in the midst of a growth spurt. The others clustered about Zsigmond's horse, bouncing with excitement as he dismounted. All the children wore simple clothing made from grain bags.

One child darted off into the cabin, giving Evie a chance to count them. Four. Just four children, thank ash, and the fifth who had run inside. It was only a small horde. She scrambled down from her horse and onto legs that were barely more solid than jelly. She clutched the horse's chest strap to keep upright.

The horse snorted, staring down at her with bemusement, then shook herself and leaned to nibble at Evie's hair.

"Stop that," she muttered, batting the head aside.

Evie stopped pushing the horse when she realized Zsigmond had vanished and the children were staring at her.

"Who're *you*?" the eldest asked.

"Evie," she said, wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead.

The child darted over to the horse and patted the mare's nose. "What's an Evie?"

"An Evie is a librarian." Csaba had told her that most people didn't know—or care to learn—the difference between carrier, librarian, and Librarian, so the pack-horse carriers generally called themselves librarians to simplify matters.

They didn't seem very convinced. "Like Librarian Lidiga?" Their siblings squirmed in agreement.

"Yes."

A couple of the children had sidled toward the mule and were worming their fingers into the saddlebags.

"Hey, stop that!" Evie snapped, heading toward the children.

Luckily, both horses and mule were trained to stop wherever their reins were dropped and were immune to the darting maneuvering of small people.

She inhaled slowly, trying to gather her thoughts. "What're your names?"

The eldest straightened their spine. "Roslo. I'm twelve. M'mothers put me in charge of the youngsters while they're in the fields."

The next-tallest shoved Roslo. "You're not in charge of *me*!" he exclaimed. He turned toward Evie. "I'm Agota. I'm *ten*, and I'm *not* a

youngster.”

The others muttered their names with prompts from Roslo and Agota, and Evie immediately lost track of who was who.

By the time introductions had finished, Zsigmond reappeared from wherever he had gone with two women beside him. They were both stout-bodied, with the same short-cropped hair and grain bag clothing as their children. With a couple of short commands to their offspring, the old books were gathered, new books distributed, and Evie introduced.

It was over and done in less than five minutes, and the carriers were on the trails again—after Evie had found a stump to use to clamber onto her horse.

There was a cluster of houses close by, and the transactions were concluded rather briskly and efficiently. Zsigmond didn’t chat with his patrons, despite fielding questions about the latest news from Atakana, the coal mines, and the district. Evie’s counterpart merely handed them the books, tipped his hat, and they were off yet again.

More patterns were revealed over the course of the day. The books Zsigmond handed out were mostly educational texts, which were received with bemused glances by several of the patrons and slumped shoulders by the children. The other ones occasionally asked for the ones with the pictures, but Zsigmond merely shrugged and handed out a primer to each child who asked. It only changed when he passed along a cobbled together scrapbook filled with recipes and quilting patterns to a family group of husbands.

The longest stop—aside from the first one—came around dinner time in the town of Kiskun, which was smaller than Hevis and had only a combined country store and moonshiner’s pub.

“We’re stopping here for the night,” Zsigmond told her, the first words he had spoken directly to her since they had left that morning. “Put the horses in the stable. I’ll order us dinner. We’re sleeping in the stable tonight, so find yourself a stall.”

Evie nodded, too exhausted to speak, and slid from her saddle gracelessly, her bones aching. It felt like there was still a horse between her legs as she wobbled toward the lean-to that served as the stable. Her fingers fumbled at the straps of bridle, saddle, and saddlebags, each weighing a million boulders. She didn’t know how she managed, but she brushed each mount down, watered them, and fed them what appeared to be hay from the stable and grain from their saddlebags before staggering inside.

There were a few other people in the pub, which was dim-lit, tiny, and dingy. Most were content to talk amongst themselves, paying no attention to the newcomers. By the time Evie had half-finished her poorly seasoned food, her eyelids were about to close permanently. It was an effort to keep them open and avoid passing out in the cabbage soup.

Despite her fatigue, it took her a long time to fall asleep. There were too many noises. People kept walking past the stables even late into the night. Small creatures scurried and scraped, horses snorted and shifted in their stalls, and all around them was the symphony of autumn insects preparing for winter.

9th of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

Evie learned four things in the first four days on the route.

Number one: Zsigmond had a girlfriend at nearly every stop.

Number two: her horse and the mule had names. Ash and Dusty.

Number three: she had more muscles than she had ever imagined, and every single one ached fiercely. By the end of the day it was an effort to move.

Number four: while the families were excited to have the librarians, there was something missing in the books they were delivering.

Evie had noticed the fourth item on her first day, which transformed into a pattern of thoughts the further they continued on their journey before coalescing into a single thought by the time they swung around to the back side of their loop.

“Why don’t we deliver children’s picture books?” she asked after a long morning of aborted questions on her end and silence on Zsigmond’s.

Zsigmond snorted. “Those silly things? The people here need educational texts, not whimsical fairy tales.”

Evie steeled herself, pulling her spine straight instead of its usual slump. “I think that the people here would like something to read that’s fun, that will take them outside of their surroundings. It would also help them read because a lot of those books have pictures.”

He glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. “What, four days on the road, and you’re already an expert on what the people here need?” He laughed.

“Just do what you’re told. It’s not like you’re going to last out here anyways, city girl.”

Evie wilted, sinking into the saddle. She remained silent for the rest of the day, summoning up polite facial expressions for each homestead and tiny hamlet. Her mind, however, churned.

She had grown up reading. Books were her life’s blood and the source of her magic, and she couldn’t imagine a world without books. But these people lived their entire lives knowing maybe four or five written stories, and some of the things that were delivered had tiny print and no pictures. For an early reader, those kinds of books weren’t helpful.

She resolved that she’d talk to Agatha again when they returned. Maybe some of the other couriers would agree with her.

14th of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

“Absolutely not.” Agatha shook her head. “Children need educational materials, and the folks here like almanacs and helpful books. Those picture books would only get torn up—plus, we provide historical fiction, and those tell a helpful and educational story about Isten.”

“Oh,” Evie managed. Her heart fell. It had taken her two days since their return—and one day since Zsigmond had packed his bags and left for the University of Ruwenzoni—to pluck up her courage to ask Agatha about providing children’s books in the saddlebags.

Agatha’s face softened. “Besides, we don’t have the resources to mend them, and we’d be hard pressed to purchase children’s picture books with our tight budget. The House of Nobles has been questioning the Guild’s use of state resources to provide books to the commoners in rural areas that aren’t attached to a guild.” She nodded ruefully, acknowledging Evie’s surprise. “Yes, despite the literacy law. It’s hard to reason with folks who are trying to cram more of the emperor’s budget into the military.”

Csaba, who had been mending books at their table, laughed as Evie’s jaw dropped further. “Don’t look so shocked, city mouse.” They chuckled. “We’re not quite country bumpkins out here. We *do* like to keep current with state events.”

Agatha leaned forward, gently closing Evie’s mouth with a light finger to her chin. “Get some rest, Evie,” she chided. “Today is your rest day. Take advantage of it.”

Evie managed a weak smile and left the tiny station, head down.

She promptly collided into something soft and was knocked to the ground with an *oompf*. She glanced up into a mess of calico skirts, petticoats, and fine stockings tucked into premium-leather button-up boots. The ensemble belonged to Marja Magdolna, who was levering herself off the ground, brownish-black ringlets shining in the weak sun.

“I’m so sorry!” Evie gasped, scrambling to her feet and ignoring the screaming of bruised muscles. She offered a hand to the other girl, who took it gratefully and rose, turning with dismay at the black coal marring the bustle of her dress. “Oh no,” Evie whispered, mind racing to all the things Mr. Marja would do to her once he found out that Evie had ruined his daughter’s expensive dress.

Magdolna glanced up, peering at Evie through long, thick lashes. “No, I should apologize to you.” A blush formed on her pale cheeks. “I was looking for Janos, and I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“But—”

Magdolna brushed at her dress, frowning slightly when the stains wouldn’t come out. A groan slipped from Evie’s mouth, which caused the other girl to look up and catch Evie’s devastated expression. “Oh no! Please don’t worry,” she begged, rushing forward to grasp Evie’s fingers. Despite the rich clothing, her hands were strong and lightly callused. Magdolna colored, the pink blush deepening to red. On her, the shade was rather becoming. “I know this sounds incredibly conceited, but I have plenty of dresses, and they get dirty very quickly out here.”

Evie couldn’t contemplate being so wealthy that the ruin of a nice dress wouldn’t be an issue. “Um, Janos isn’t here,” she managed. She mentally cursed herself for her awkwardness.

“Oh, I hoped I could see him today.” Magdolna’s smile faltered before brightening, lips stretched into a too-wide grin. “Wait, you’re the new

carrier, right? Evie? From Carus?”

“Yes?” Evie replied hesitantly.

Magdolna tugged her down the road toward the company buildings with bouncing enthusiasm.

“Goodness, I’m so happy we’ve finally met! I’ve been wanting to talk to you about the capitol and all of the latest fashions and doings and—I’m Magdolna, by the way, but of course you know who I am. Everyone does.” She frowned. “That sounds arrogant, doesn’t it?” She stopped, releasing Eve’s arm. “Oh, my manners. I forgot to ask if you were free.” Evie stared, rendered mute by Magdolna’s bubblyness. “Would you like to have tea with me? Nanny makes a lovely scone.”

Realizing she now had a perfect excuse to do something other than sit in her tiny room and count the knots in the pine ceiling, Evie nodded. Magdolna seemed excitable but nice, and she was weary of the bland cafeteria food that was standard to the mining company.

*

Evie heaved a huge sigh after leaving the overly fine house. Magdolna was one of the nicest girls she had ever met, but an hour with her—like an hour with most people, not just one who gushed continuously over Janos—was emotionally draining. By the time their meeting was over, Evie knew all about the love lives of everyone in Hevis (the majority of whom she didn’t know), been drained of the latest fashion plates in Carus (a subject she did not know), and wanted nothing more than to return to her tiny room, cuddle with her cats, and reread her favorite fairy tales. People were draining.

Unfortunately, her vision of solitude was delayed when Csaba asked her to help clean stalls.

When Evie finally escaped to her room, both Mathilde and Theodosia were grumpy with hunger, and she was coated in dust and horse grime. After feeding the cats and wiping herself off with a wet cloth, Evie happily curled up onto the floor—tossing down her bedroll as a cushion—and read *The Emperor of Sky*, a collection of fairy tales written by Haan Vøll.

Her magic unfurled. The duke and frog from “A Lucky Duke” crawled out of the page and danced about in their courtship rituals as the frog tried to convince the arrogant duke to kiss him. When the haughty noble agreed after much angst and handwringing, he was transformed into a frog, and the two lived happily ever after, feasting on flies and lazing about in the sun.

Evie closed the book and leaned her head against the bed. Her stomach growled from a missed dinner, and it was hard to keep her eyes open, but her lips curled up.

She had a solution to the book problem.

And she wasn't going to ask Agatha's permission this time.

19th of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

Csaba shivered as they checked and double-checked Ash and Dusty's tack.

"Guess autumn is fully here," they muttered, burrowing their head deeper into their pink scarf. Csaba only had two or three of the brightly colored things and rotated them with extreme care.

They boosted Evie into the saddle, and she gathered the reins, trying to will her nervousness away. This was her first trip alone. She'd hoped to have one more with a partner, but Agatha had assured her that the horse and mule knew the route, and she'd be fine. Plus, with Zsigmond gone and Tundë with a freshly broken leg, they were short-handed.

Csaba wasn't as confident as the station head and had helped Evie pack that night, slipping additional food, blankets, and warming stones in with the rest of her supplies. They had stumbled across the children's books Evie had stuffed into her personal saddlebags but had merely raised an eyebrow instead of saying anything.

"I feel a storm coming, so make sure that you're off the road and someplace safe before dark," Csaba told her, patting her knee. Though their lips were pulled into a tight smile, their eyes were filled with concern that was underlaid by the tension in their fingers. "You have the map, right?"

Evie patted the breast pocket of her vest. Parchment crinkled.

Csaba blew out a breath. "Well, you're as ready as you'll ever be."

"Fine praise," Evie murmured. "If the storm hits, what do I do?"

Csaba's eyebrows rose. "You have a route to deliver. Unless it's life threatening—filling up creek beds past full, causing mudslides, lightning—you keep to your route. Your jacket, hat, boots, and the saddlebags are spelled against wet, thanks to Tundë. Remember to check your mounts for chafing wherever the leather rubs. And rocks too. If they're limping, you stop *immediately* and see what's wrong. A lame pony can cause you to walk the route instead of ride, and people are waiting on you."

Evie gulped. The tension in her chest mounted instead of being relieved by Csaba's instructions. Ash tossed her head.

It was time to go.

"And watch out for bears," Csaba added.

Evie blanched. There were *bears*?

*

A fine drizzle had begun by the time they reached the first house, turning Ash's grey coat black and transforming Dusty from pale dun to chocolate. Evie shivered. Her things might be spelled against the rain, but they certainly weren't spelled for warmth. The chill seeped through her layers and into her very bones. The cold, wet winters of Carus were nothing compared to the mountains.

She'd had to wipe her glasses over and over as they'd ridden on. While her hat protected the lenses from the worst of the rain droplets, they kept fogging over. It didn't help that the droplets and fog caused shadows at her peripheral vision. She'd exhausted herself by constantly turning at every shadow, each flit of movement at the corners of her eyes. Csaba's warning about bears had her spooked.

A light winked through the trees, and Ash turned toward it, head down as she plodded doggedly along.

Evie thought she recognized the cabin, although the yard was devoid of the chickens and children and farmers from her first visit. A dog barked as they approached, and she jumped, but nothing appeared.

As they neared the house, the door opened. One of the farmers stepped onto the porch, her frame silhouetted in the doorway. A smaller figure popped out from behind the first, wriggling its way through the door and onto the porch.

“The librarian!” the child yelled and made a flying leap for the ground. They were caught midair by the farmer, who held them tight and shook her head at her offspring.

By this time Evie had pulled close enough to recognize Roslo, their siblings huddled in the doorway behind their mother. She didn’t see their other mother but smelled something delicious coming from the tiny house.

“Delivery,” she announced, voice coming out in a squeak instead of the confident bark she had wanted.

“Why don’t you come inside and get warm for a minute before you head off,” the farmer offered.

Evie shook her head. “I’m fine but thank you.” She was already behind schedule. She carefully pulled out a wrapped package from one of her saddlebags. When Csaba wasn’t looking, she had slipped one of her own children’s books into each package. If Csaba *had* seen her, they had chosen not to comment. “Here’re your new books. I hope you enjoy them.”

Roslo leapt up, snatching the bundle from Evie’s hands before she handed it to their mother. Another child ran up, presenting the old books to Evie solemnly. As Evie stuffed the returned books into her saddlebag, one of the children shouted, “Ma! This one has *pictures!* And they’re funny!”

Evie’s heart soared as the other children left the porch to scramble toward the new books.

The farmer glanced at her children, shaking her head.

Her wife came out onto the porch with a bundle of cloth. “If you can’t stay, at least take a warm biscuit.”

Evie paused. Csaba had warned her over and over that she shouldn’t take anything from these people—they were too poor to be able to part with anything. But Csaba had also told her that mountain folk were uncomfortable receiving things for free, even books delivered by the librarian guild. Tamping down her worries that she’d be depriving one of the children part of their meal, Evie took the biscuit. The warmth washed over her fingers through her gloves.

“Thank you,” she said, unwrapping the cloth cover. She took a bite. Warm buttery bread spilled into her mouth, followed by the salty gooiness of melted cheese. She moaned slightly. “This is so good.”

The woman grinned, revealing two missing front teeth. “I’ll get you the recipe.” She darted inside, returning within seconds and pressing a piece of paper into Evie’s hands. “This recipe has been passed down from my great-grandmother to me.”

“And you want me to have it?” Evie asked, stuffing the paper into her vest pocket beside the map to avoid getting it wet.

The farmer grinned. “I’ve got it memorized. And Roslo is learning their letters—we can write it down again.”

“Thank you,” Evie said, touched by the gesture.

“Keep yourself on the alert now,” the farmer added. “We’ve seen some bear scat around the fields in the past couple weeks. Nothing to be too worried about since they tend to steer clear of humans.”

Any sense of gratitude Evie had had was replaced by a chill of fear running down her spine.

The biscuit and recipe were the only good things to come out of that first day on the road.

The rain grew worse, turning from drizzle to downpour by the time Ash led them to Kiskun. There, the pub owner told her that they had no more room in the stables, so she'd have to go someplace else that night.

Luckily, Csaba had packed a canvas tarp and rope. Evie found a tree with wide branches and struggled to create a tent with cold-stiffened fingers. After three attempts where the tent collapsed and the branches smacked her in the face, she managed something that was not quite leakproof, took the saddle and bags off Ash and Dusty, and spent a freezing night in the mud. She forgot to lay down branches, and her sleeping roll became caked and wet. Sleep didn't come. She was too wet, too miserable, and too busy imagining predators rushing to eat her and the animals.

The next morning the weather continued its deluge, transforming the narrow trails into ankle-high muck and rendering everything unrecognizable.

Evie had been going off Ash's keen sense of direction the previous day, but by midmorning the mare seemed just as lost as she was. She kept trying to turn toward what Evie thought was Hevis.

Evie tugged the horse toward their first stop of the day, looking around to check which way they needed to go. Her glasses were fogging over again, and she wiped them off with the dry part of her scarf. Ash stood placidly, not moving in one direction or another as Evie stared frantically at the unfamiliar trees, the creek, and the shale-ridden side of the mountain she was currently riding around.

Evie realized she was lost.

“Okay girl,” she whispered, nudging Ash and hoping that she’d pick a direction and go to their next stop. They were on something that might be a trail, but she had no idea if it was the *right* trail. *Trust the horse*, Csaba and Agatha had repeated over and over. Ash merely lowered her head to nibble at stray bits of foliage. Dusty followed, tugging at the lead rope until he could comfortably munch at a fern.

“Come on,” Evie muttered, squeezing her knees into Ash’s side. The mare lurched a forearm to the right, causing Evie to sway precariously in the saddle, as she lipped at another bit of grass.

Evie tried tugging on the reins, but it was no use. Ash refused to lift her head no matter how much she pulled. She tried kicking the mare’s sides, but the horse heaved a sigh and continued, an ear flicking back with annoyance.

“Please, Ash,” she begged.

She dismounted, trying to tamp down the rising panic as she tried to spot something familiar. The fog and rain limited her ability to get a glimpse of anything through the trees lining the trail—if this even was a trail.

Something crashed in the underbrush to her left, coming down from the mountainside, and she jumped. Ash and Dusty’s heads jerked up, Ash shying to the side and into Evie.

The blow knocked her off the narrow trail, and her foot slipped. She lost her hold on the reins and shrieked as her arms pinwheeled for balance as she fell down the hill.

Her head and back hit the shale-covered slope, and she slid down the rock, sharp spikes of pain heralding each new gash and cut.

She stopped sliding an arm’s length before the overflowing creek, the rushing water erasing all sound beyond her ragged panting. A sob escaped

Evie's throat as she struggled to sit up, pain radiating from every part of her body. She collapsed to the ground, mud squelching and rocks digging into her shoulder blades.

Rain splattered against her face, forcing her to try to get up once again. Tears ran down her cheeks, mixing with the rain as she rolled over to hands and knees. She couldn't put weight on her hands. When she turned them over, there was nothing but redness. Her palms burned as droplets hit tender flesh.

It took several tries, but she staggered to her feet, cradling her hands before her, and looked uphill for Ash and Dusty.

They were gone.

Whatever had spooked them had run them off. Her chest tightened, and her throat closed in a mixture of pain and panic as she glanced left and right, moving as fast as her body would allow back up the hill. When she was several strides from the trail, she peered up again, hoping that her poor vision hadn't been able to tell horse apart from brush and mountain.

There was no sign of them.

In their place stood the dark form of a small person.

At first, she thought it was a child because it stood upright. She squinted, her fuzzy brain registering confusion at its dark fur coat, protruding muzzle, and missing front paw. She squinted harder, trying to bring him into focus. Her glasses had gone missing in her fall along with her hat and half her senses.

It was a bear cub.

It carefully made its way down the hill, its three legs moving slowly and precisely with each step until it found her hat. It had been flung off sometime during her fall, surviving intact, if muddy. The cub rose to its hind legs, bent, and picked it up with a front paw.

The action was so human that Evie thought she was hallucinating until she remembered that lots of bears were trained as circus performers. If this cub were a circus bear, its handlers should be close by, and she'd be saved.

As the cub placed the hat onto its head, wiggling so that its ears were pushed down, Evie took a step forward.

"Help!" she screamed.

The cub jerked, hat falling to the ground.

"Someone! Please, help!"

The cub stared at her, head cocked. It toddled toward her after picking up the hat once again and held it out to her.

Numbly, Evie took it, hands shaking as she lifted it to her head.

The cub reached forward, wrapping its one front paw about her hand with surprising dexterity. It stared up at her with big, brown eyes and tugged at her hand.

Evie winced at the contact but took a step forward. And another as the bear led her up the hill.

They moved past the trail, through the underbrush, and up and up and up.

Her legs burned at the climb, but the cub was slow and careful, moving on two legs and looking back at her after each stumble. Her tears had stopped. Her vision grayed at the edges, and her mind felt like it was filled with cotton. She was numb, inside and out, hardly aware that she followed a bear up a mountain and into the forest. Shivers racked her body, and her exhales puffed out in shaking pants.

The bear led her to a cave in the side of the mountain, the hole large enough for her to walk through without bending over. The entrance was partially obscured with thick branches and neatly stacked rocks. Evie

noticed but didn't comprehend as she stared in shock into the dimly lit cave.

The light coming from within was blotted out by a massive form. Evie gazed up and up and up as a massive bear stepped forward, filling up the entrance.

At the sight of her impending death, the last of Evie's strength gave out, and she collapsed onto the muddy path.

20th of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

Smoke and musk wafted into her nose as she came to her senses, blinking groggily, eyes unfocused before she closed them again. She tried to sit up, but her muscles gave out. She collapsed with a moan into something soft and surprisingly warm.

She was warm. Warm *and* dry.

And there was someone *breathing* onto her face.

Her eyes flew open, taking a minute to focus on a light-brown face hovering three knuckles from her nose. She jerked backward, meeting resistance against the soft whatever-it-was she lay on.

“Ma!” the child—it *was* a child—yelled. He had a thick accent that was nothing like the Tartas Mountains homesteader’s drawl. “She’s awake!”

Evie winced. The boy hadn’t removed his face from hers, and his exclamation went straight into her ears.

“Leave her alone, Lajos,” a feminine voice admonished. “She’s got a nasty bump on her head.”

Evie turned her head, trying to catch the source, but everything was blurry. She squinted. There was something wrong with her eyes. She frowned, trying to remember. She’d been lost. She’d fallen down a mountainside. She’d seen a...a bear cub?

“My glasses!” she gasped, trying to sit up and smacking the boy in the noggin. Instead of crying, he giggled and patted her forehead with soothing, if awkward, taps.

Then Evie remembered what was more important than her vision. Or the bear cub. Or her fall. “Oh no. The horses. The *books*. They’re going to *kill* me.”

Someone crouched beside her, and Evie made out a large woman with the same golden-tinted brown skin as the child, and her hair fanned out from her face in a light-brown halo. She wore a baggy brown dress. The rest of her features, beyond the hint of a strong chin, arched nose, and high cheekbones, were hidden by Evie’s poor vision.

The woman helped her to sitting. She was surprisingly strong. “Now, now, calm down. What are you missing, and *who* is going to kill you?”

Evie gave a garbled version of what had happened, accepting sips of a thick, soothing tea whenever her voice faltered. The woman offered gentle murmurs of encouragement in the right places. When the child—Lajos—bounced with excitement or opened his mouth to interject, the woman merely placed a hand on his shoulder, and he settled.

When Evie finished, the woman nodded firmly. “I’ll head down the hill with Lajos, and we’ll see if you can find your glasses-things and where your horses went. You said they were carrying books?”

“Yes.” Evie remembered the most important thing and tried to sit up again. “But there were *bears*! I *saw* them!”

The woman gently pressed her down into the pile of rags, boughs, and furs forming Evie’s makeshift bed. “We’ll be fine,” she soothed. “You’re safe here.” Her voice was tinged with something resembling humor. “Can you eat?”

Evie shook her head, regretting the motion. Her stomach ached. Her entire body was one raw lump. She held up her hands to her face, realizing that they were covered in rough bandages. Pain and exhaustion hit her with

a wave as the adrenaline from waking up and realizing her mistake drained away.

“Um, no. No, I think I’d throw up.”

The woman grunted. “You did have a rough fall.” She stood up.

Evie closed her eyes. The woman seemed to go on forever. *Had she been rescued by a giant?*

“We’ll be back. You get some rest.”

Evie’s head bobbed sleepily in agreement, and her eyelids slid closed.

*

She woke again, immediately aware that she had done something terrible and would be fired and transferred or sent to become a collier to work in the mines until her debt to the librarian guild had been paid.

Footsteps and soft murmuring jerked her attention away from her dismal future. There was a low, feminine voice, followed by the high-pitched voice of a child struggling to whisper and failing.

Evie’s lips parted. She tried to draw their attention, but the only sound out of her cracked lips was a low moan.

The murmuring stopped.

“Ah, you’re awake.” The woman crouched beside her, holding out something in her hands. “I’m not sure how these work, but we found them on the hill. They must have fallen off during your tumble.”

Evie took the offering. The glasses had survived better than she had. Miraculously, the glass lenses hadn’t cracked, and the arms were intact. Her bandaged hands fumbled as she put her glasses on her face, and she blinked a few times, head throbbing as the world slid into focus.

Once the worst of the dizziness had passed, Evie tilted her head up and gasped as she took in the other woman for the first time. Her rescuer was large—somehow bigger in focus than she had been as a fuzzy blur.

Even crouched, she loomed over Evie in both height and width. The only words Evie could summon up to describe her were big-boned and brawny. She was surprisingly young, with an unwrinkled face that possessed dark-brown eyes, the strong features Evie had noticed earlier, and a thin-lipped mouth. Her brown hair was wild and unruly, a mass of riotous crinkles.

“Didn’t find the horses though,” the woman added, oblivious to Evie’s astonishment. “From the tracks and the smell, they headed north and east. There’s a settlement about a half-day’s walk up there, so that’s where they probably ended up.”

“Thank you for saving me,” Evie whispered. She blinked back tears at the news of Ash and Dusty. Hopefully, she’d be able to track them down when she was able to move.

Disappointment had drained the little energy she had left, and she found her mind drifting as the woman talked, her voice low and soothing. A thought popped into her head as she neared sleep. “You didn’t run into the bears, did you?”

The child laughed, stopping immediately when the woman glared at him. She turned to Evie.

“We certainly didn’t,” she assured her. There was an odd twinkle in her eye. “Now get some rest. We’ll be sleeping with you because we’ve only got the one bed, and you’re in it.”

Half asleep, Evie’s cheeks colored with embarrassment. “I—” she began, about to apologize for inconveniencing the woman and her child. They were obviously poor with clothes that were barely more than rags and living in what appeared to be a cave. She was taking up their scant resources.

The woman held up a hand, stopping further protest. “It’s the least we can do,” she said, shooting another glare at her child. “Particularly since it’s partly our fault you’re here.”

“Huh?” Evie mumbled but was already asleep once again.

*

She woke on and off during the night, surrounded in warmth. On one side was a small, boney-edged boy that wriggled throughout the night, sometimes moving closer, sometimes away, and on the other was the woman, emanating warmth and security with each deep snore.

Instead of feeling suffocated, Evie felt safe and comfortable between the two of them. She was warm in a way she hadn’t been since she’d left Carus, and the woman’s body radiated heat like a furnace.

Morning of the 21st of Krysk, 204th Year of the Diamond

“I don’t even know your name,” Evie realized aloud as she accepted a wooden slab with seven roughly spherical biscuits, several cut apples, and what were maybe chunks of cooked meat. Lajos was still cuddled against Evie’s side, his half arm thrown across her lap, and his nose buried against her hip. Evie had only been woken up moments before when the woman knelt beside her and handed Evie her glasses.

The woman plopped onto the ground. “Katalin,” she replied, leaning forward to take a biscuit from the tray. Her eyes closed momentarily with bliss as she bit into it, and she eagerly stretched toward a bit of the meat.

Her eyes opened, catching Evie’s dubious expression. “It’s venison.”

Lajos stirred beside Evie, nose twitching as he sniffed. “Is that breakfast?” he mumbled, pushing himself up into a bleary seated position. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his stump as his other hand moved toward a biscuit. His eyes hadn’t even opened fully before he stuffed the biscuit into his mouth, chubby cheeks working furiously.

Evie giggled at the sight.

Katalin laughed too. “You’d better dig in. We’re pretty hungry this time of year.”

Evie sobered immediately at the stark reminder that she was taking precious resources away from these people. It wasn’t like the two had much to begin with. They lived in a cave. The only furnishings were some makeshift wooden and stone cookware, a fire set close to the cave’s

opening, and the bed of rags Evie sat on. She couldn't see into the cave, which narrowed considerably.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take—"

Katalin's eyes flashed, and her chin jerked up. "Don't throw our hospitality in our faces. Just—don't."

"I—I didn't mea—"

"We might not have much, but we have enough to care for one more. It's the least we can do." Katalin waved her hand about, indicating her home and moving on from her ambiguous statement. "This is only temporary." Her face changed, darkening with some rapidly repressed emotion. She shook her head, curls tossing about like waves. "I'm sorry." Her voice was filled with shame and reproach.

"No, I'm sorry," Evie said. "I didn't mean to imply—"

Katalin shook her head again.

Evie decided against finishing her thought as she ducked her chin toward her lap and stared down at the too-large, brown homespun she wore. She didn't even remember being dressed.

Lajos crawled into her lap, butt wriggling as he got in a position guaranteeing more snuggles and food. His grubby fingers grabbed another biscuit.

"Eat an apple slice, Lajos," Katalin said, lightly scolding.

He pouted, but his hand diverged on its course and chose the fruit. He crunched down happily, juices smearing along his chin.

"How old is he?" Evie asked, trying to change the subject and piece together a story that worked for the pair.

"Four." Katalin's eyes softened as she stared at her son. She took another biscuit. "You should eat one before they're gone."

Evie suppressed a smile, absently reaching for a biscuit and trying to avoid staring at Katalin for too long. Katalin appeared too young to have a four-year-old son—she looked barely older than Evie herself and had avoided the premature aging so predominated in the people of the Tartas Mountains.

Evie opened her mouth to ask the question that burned her tongue.

“Before you ask,” Katalin said, following Evie’s gaze back to Lajos, noting the question on her face. “No, it’s not too personal. He got caught in a trapper’s snare when he was two. We had to amputate the arm.”

That was *not* the question Evie had been about to ask, but it prompted several follow-up questions. What had a two-year-old been doing running about in an area that could have traps horrible enough to snap off a baby’s arm? She shook her head slightly, not wanting to pry further but desperate to know more.

“Mama says I wandered too far,” Lajos supplied, spewing biscuit crumbs from his too-full mouth.

“Chew and swallow before speaking, sweetie.”

Evie heard, rather than saw, the child gulp. His body heaved as he choked. She patted him on the back, hoping he hadn’t accidentally killed himself, but he shoveled more food into his mouth without pausing.

“Actually—” Evie took a bite of her biscuit. She paused. Blinked. It tasted nuttier than expected. Slightly bitter and definitely *not* flour- or barley-based. She changed course. “What is this made of?”

Katalin flushed. “Acorn flour. We call it a poor biscuit.”

“It’s good.” Evie took another bite. She wasn’t lying. Despite the slight bitterness, it had been flavored with some things she couldn’t place, and there were brown pieces that could be mushrooms or meat or fish or *something*, and it was surprisingly flavorful.

“I was actually going to ask how old you are. If you don’t mind me prying.”

“Nineteen summers,” the other girl replied. She held Evie’s gaze calmly with a maturity beyond her years. “And yes, Lajos *is* my son.” She cocked her head. “Last night, you mentioned something about books and horses and a garbled story about being on a route to deliver these books and you got lost?”

Evie blinked at the rapid change of subject. The anxiety from the night before sprang up as she repeated her story—hopefully a more coherent version than the previous night—even if her body was only mildly achy. When she expressed surprise over the lack of pain, Katalin shrugged coyly.

“I have a healing salve,” she admitted. “I put some on your cuts to help ease the pain and prevent infection.”

“Why do you live so far away from everyone?” Evie blurted. The question had popped into her mind and out of her mouth before she could censor it. Katalin’s eyes flashed before she turned her head away. “I’m sorry,” Evie apologized.

Katalin’s face twisted with an emotion Evie didn’t recognize. *Anger? Sadness? Remorse?*

The other girl shook her head. “It’s all right,” she said after a long sigh. “I like the peace. Although we won’t be here long. Only for the winter, I think.”

Evie had so many questions threatening to bubble out of her mouth, mainly where they had originally come from. Like Lajos, Katalin’s accent wasn’t the slow, measured drawl of the Tartas mountain folk or the quicker drawl of the people living around Ruwenzoni, but something that suggested that Istian was not her first language. Her words were quick,

rhythmic, with the endings of some words dropped as if she couldn't be bothered to pronounce each word in its entirety.

By this point in the conversation, the food had run dry. Lajos had abandoned them to sniff around the cave, searching for more treats. Katalin watched him, eyes soft.

Long past the point where another question on Evie's end would have been beyond awkward, Katalin offered, "If you feel well enough to walk, I can take you to the nearest huma—um, homestead."

"Yes please." Evie pushed the rags and furs of her makeshift bed away. Katalin had to help her stand, and she groaned as each movement tweaked a bruise or cut or scrape. She was not as healed as she had thought, but the sooner she found Ash and Dusty, the sooner she returned to her route and stop eating the scarce food of poor mountain people.

With Katalin's help, Evie undressed and crawled into her own clothes. They were completely dry but reeked of horse, dried sweat, and blood instead of the heavy musk and smoke of Katalin's rough shift. She missed the loss of Katalin's scent wrapped around her and caught herself watching at Katalin as she dressed. A couple of times, she saw Katalin giving her a similar look—measuring, curious, questioning—before dropping her gaze just as quickly.

Evie's hands were too bandaged to do her own buttons, so Katalin helped. Somehow, Katalin being in her personal space didn't feel intrusive.

This close, Evie was reminded how safe she had felt sleeping beside the other woman. There was something comforting in the way Katalin loomed over her, something adorable in how her tongue peeked out from the corner of her mouth as her large fingers struggled with the buttons.

Katalin was very careful not to actually touch Evie, but on the rare occasions when skin met skin, Evie swore sparks tingled up her back and

sent quivers to her stomach.

She wondered if Katalin felt the same way, and shook her head, trying to toss the thought from her mind. They had just met—and Evie had inconvenienced her enough. Of course Katalin wouldn't have a strange attraction to a total stranger.

*

The walk to the nearest homestead was long, slow, and painful. Evie realized halfway down the mountain—it might not have been a real mountain, but it certainly *seemed* like one—that she had not healed enough for this journey.

She had been too busy focusing on holding onto Katalin and not falling over when she'd pulled her pants on to pay attention to any bruises or cuts. Her muscles screamed in pain, and there was definitely something wrong with her left wrist and right knee she hadn't noticed earlier due to the bandages and general aching everywhere else. Both were swollen to twice their normal size and were hot and tender to the touch.

“Do you want to go back?” Katalin asked for the fifth time after forcing Evie to stop for another rest.

Evie leaned over to catch her wind as every muscle shrieked in protest. And this was only *downhill*. She had no idea how she'd climbed up here in the first place. She was thankful that despite being overcast and foggy, it wasn't raining. That, and Katalin's presence, were the only good things in Evie's life at the moment.

She shook her head. “No,” she panted. “I really need to find out what happened.” Ash, Dusty and the books were unaccounted for, and *those* were worth far more than her comfort. Hundreds of people were depending on her, and she was already very late in her delivery schedule.

Katalin pursed her lips but bent down and helped Evie stand. One minute, Evie was sitting, and the next, she was on her feet, two large hands cupped gently underneath her elbows. She blinked. Katalin hadn't even *grunted* or strained.

They continued down the mountain until Evie recognized the still-swollen creek and beside it, the trail. While she still wasn't sure that this trail was the one on her route, she did recognize it as the one with the bear. The creek had risen further since Evie's fall, and now its edges nearly touched the rocky path. If she had fallen today, she would have been swept away by the rapid current. The thought chilled her more than the cool air.

Lajos, who had been bouncing about the hillside like a maniacal goat, darted to the bank before running to Evie and Katalin, who were making their steady way down. Evie leaned heavily on Katalin for support and apologized profusely.

After an interminable walk, they reached the trail. Lajos had already made five trips to them, to the water, and back. He vibrated with a wild intensity, eager for more. Evie took another break, embarrassed to be so weak when Katalin had been practically carrying her the entire way and a little jealous of Lajos's endless energy. Didn't the kid need a nap at some point?

She sat on a fallen log to rest her trembling legs, telling herself she'd only rest a minute. Katalin stayed close, keeping one watchful eye on her son and the other on Evie.

As Evie caught her breath, she found herself staring at Katalin. Unobscured by the dimness of the cave, Katalin's skin was less a light brown and more olive-gold. Her hair matched her skin and billowed about her face in wild waves and corkscrews with blonde streaks that glimmered every time they hit the light. She really *was* a giant and held herself proud

and tall instead of trying to squish into herself to appear smaller the way tall people often did.

In the light details about Katalin's poverty became much more apparent. Her feet were bare, yet thick with callouses and toughened to withstand the sharp shale of her mountain home. The rough dress she wore hit midcalf, revealing muddy, muscled legs. There was no tailoring to the dress at all—it looked like an old grain bag that had holes cut out for her head and arms. Two large pockets had been sewn into the dress's sides and were heavily laden with the various mushrooms, lichen, and plants Katalin had been foraging along their way.

Despite the chill, she didn't wear a shawl or a jacket. Neither did Lajos, who wore rough leather moccasins on his feet and a smaller, better kept version of Katalin's bag-dress. They didn't seem at all cold. Evie chalked their imperviousness up to the tough mountain living the two endured. A heavy sadness hit her at the thought of them up here, alone and with nothing.

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Katalin grew tired of the constant breaks, and finally picked Evie up into her arms for the last several leagues of their journey.

She held Evie gently, cradling her against her chest with no effort.

“I’m sorry,” Evie whispered, awkward, weak, and uncomfortable with her odd feelings of slow arousal at being carried so close to Katalin’s chest.

“Don’t be,” Katalin replied. She spoke easily and walked like Evie weighed absolutely nothing. “It’s not a hardship. But I should put you down before we get to the hu—*homestead*. It might look a little strange.”

Evie agreed that the sight of one person carrying another with no effort would look a little strange. No matter how light the person, with the kind of distance they been traveling, anyone would struggle. Yet Katalin ambled easily onwards without pause with an endurance Evie admired even if her muddled brain told her that something wasn’t quite right. Katalin pace was steady, measured, and slow, a stark contrast to Lajos’s continued bouncing gait and excitable manner.

Without the pain of walking, Evie was able to pay closer attention to her surroundings in an effort to not overthink Katalin’s superhuman strength. Thinking about Katalin’s inconsistencies only made her head hurt worse.

Nothing was familiar, but it was entertaining watching Lajos poke and prod at every unusual thing he found. Her eyes boggled as he tested plant,

seed, berry, and fungus with his mouth, only occasionally bringing each prize to his mother to check. It seemed like everything he picked was gobbled up, and when he grew bored with that, he shoved his hand into one of Katalin's pockets and removed a bit of biscuit or fruit.

"He's always eating something," Evie observed.

Katalin grunted a laugh, making Evie turn her head. She nearly smacked her forehead against Katalin's chin. Her lips were so close to Katalin's neck that if she tilted her cheek just a hair, she'd kiss that soft skin. This close, Katalin's scent was intoxicating. Evie shook her head and leaned away, barely catching the last bit of Katalin's sentence.

"—winter is on its way." Katalin's voice was oddly strained. Her arms and body weren't tensed, and Evie didn't feel like she was in danger of being dropped, but there was tension in the other woman's tone, and her face had lines of worry and something Evie couldn't identify.

"If I'm too heavy—"

Katalin cut her off sharply. "You're not too heavy."

Evie shut up at the tone and curled back into her usual ball of embarrassment and shame. She became conscious of every single one of her fat rolls, of the way Katalin's strong arms held her chubby thighs, how her chin must have doubled with the way she was holding herself. A steady warmth spread from her cheeks and across her face.

Suddenly, Katalin stopped dead in her tracks. Her face paled. "Lajos," she called, her voice a fierce whisper.

The boy had stopped too, staring down the narrow trail toward something Evie couldn't see. His hand hovered two knuckles from his face, mouth open to receive a bug that was still squirming.

"Lajos," Katalin whisper-called again. Her voice was urgent, nearly frantic. Her hold on Evie tightened.

Evie squeaked.

The boy turned, his face tight and pale with fear. "Mama?"

"Get out of sight, right *now*," Katalin ordered.

He dropped the bug and fled into the trees, vanishing.

"What's happening?" Evie asked.

"Shh," Katalin hissed. "I need to put you down. Can you stand on your own?"

Evie nodded, growing alarmed.

Katalin set her down gently and stepped away as two horsemen came trotting into sight. They pulled up sharply upon sight of the two women. Evie froze. Each had long rifles strapped to their saddles. Their faces were obscured by wide-brimmed hats, and their bodies were hidden by bulky fur coats, save for the thick black beard of one and the trim mustached face of the other.

"Mornin'," the bearded one said in surprise. "We weren't expecting to see anyone out around here."

"Neither were we," Katalin replied warily. She stood in the middle of the trail, blocking the men's way. Despite her pale face, she radiated strength and solidity.

The men took in her and Evie, likely taking in the one's state of poverty, the other's muddy clothes and battered face.

"Have you seen a courier from the Librarian's Guild around here?" the first man asked. His body weight was relaxed in the saddle, a distinct contrast to Katalin's defensive posture.

Evie perked up. "That's me." She took a step forward, wincing in pain. Katalin lunged, catching her elbow and holding her up before she tripped and fell.

"You all right?" the barefaced man asked.

“I had a bad fall.” Evie frowned, confused. “How did you know to look?”

“A horse and mule showed up at our house yesterday afternoon,” the first man answered. “Before the tracks washed away, we saw they looked to be coming from this direction.” He leaned forward, squinting at her.

“Ash and Dusty are all right?” Evie gasped.

The men nodded.

“And the books?”

The men nodded again and seemed amused by her sigh of relief.

“Everything’s safe,” the first man replied. “We’ve got them in the cabin. Hope you don’t mind, but the kids have been amusing themselves looking at the pictures of some of them. We put them back before we rode out this morning.” He put a hand on his chest. “I’m Daan, and this is my husband, Elek. If you’d like, we’ll give you a ride to the cabin. Our partners should have a pretty decent meal made up.”

“Please,” Evie said, at the same time as Katalin’s firm, “Thank you, but no.” Evie shot a terrified glance at Katalin. It had only been a day and some, but she didn’t want to leave her rescuer. Both woman and child had done so much for her in such a short time.

Katalin turned her head, taking in Evie’s fear. She softened her stance. “I’m fine walking,” she amended. Softer, she whispered, so the men wouldn’t overhear, “Lajos will be fine. He knows to follow and stay out of sight.”

“Thank you,” Evie mouthed. The homesteaders might have been polite and have rescued her horses and the books, but she didn’t quite trust them. Yet she wasn’t going to abuse Katalin’s mercy further and have her carry her anymore. She looked up at Daan and Elek, pressing a hand against her belly to steady her nerves. “I’ll take that ride, if you don’t mind.”

It ended up taking Katalin lifting and Daan pulling to get her into the saddle behind Daan, the horse jumping every time Katalin came close. Evie's legs and lower back ached at having to sit on a horse again, and her arms barely wrapped all the way around Daan's broad middle, but she was determined to hang on.

The two men kept their horses at a walk so Katalin didn't have to trot to keep up with them. They peppered Evie with questions, friendly and so unassuming that she told them what had happened, how Katalin had rescued her and was bringing her to find her horses and their precious cargo. She didn't mention, however, where Katalin lived or Lajos' existence. Daan and Elek might be friendly and helpful, but Katalin was clearly running from *something*.

All too soon they arrived at a break in the trees.

A tiny log cabin stood in the middle of a small clearing. The door opened upon their arrival, and a woman with a bump on her chest exited followed by a miniature herd of children. It was so like most of the other mountain homes that Evie thought perhaps she had been on her route and not lost after all.

"You two are back earl—" The woman's mouth closed with an audible snap midword when she spotted Evie and Katalin.

Katalin had frozen at the sight of the cabin and stood several paces behind Evie, eyes wide, mouth slightly parted. The woman stepped from the house and onto the muddy ground, cradling her bump, which was a baby in a sling.

"Who'd you find, Daan?"

"The missing librarian and her—" Daan stopped, twisting around in the saddle as he must've realized he'd never learned her name. Katalin stared back at him, her entire body rigid. She appeared ready to fight.

“My friend,” Evie answered in a rush, hoping to calm Katalin down and assure herself the knots in her stomach didn’t mean these people were dangerous and going to eat them. “She rescued me after I fell.”

Katalin’s stance didn’t change.

“Oh,” the woman replied dismissively. “I made lunch. It should be enough for additions.” She eyed Katalin warily.

Katalin was silent, but her head dipped briefly in assent.

Elek dismounted, moving over to help Evie down before Daan was able to leave his horse. As soon as Evie’s feet touched the ground, her legs crumpled, muscles giving out from exhaustion.

Before her knees hit mud, Katalin held her in her warm, strong arms. Somehow, the woman had closed the distance in time to catch her.

“I’ve got you,” Katalin whispered.

“Thank you,” Evie replied, her voice just as low. Her cheeks heated up again.

Katalin lifted Evie to her feet effortlessly and wrapped her arm around Evie’s waist, holding her up.

“She’s badly hurt,” Katalin said, addressing the settlers for about the first time since she had declined the ride.

The homesteader woman had hurried toward them but had stopped beside Daan’s horse. “Let’s get her inside then.” She unwrapped the baby and handed it to Elek. “Husband of mine, it’s your turn to feed him.” Elek took the baby, and the woman approached Evie and Katalin, her hands out to help.

“I’ve got her,” Katalin said, seeming to soften a bit.

“I’m Vanda.” The woman smiled slightly in greeting. “I’m a bit of a healer. Let’s you and me get her inside so I can take a look at her injuries.”

Katalin relented. “All right.” She lifted Evie off her feet and into her arms. Evie’s head whirled with pain and exhaustion.

Together they followed Vanda inside. The cabin was small but homey, opening straight into a living area and kitchen. Elek had already moved inside and had removed his thick fur jacket to breastfeed the baby while two other children—both toddlers—swarmed about his feet, grabbing his knees and asking for stories. Vanda planted a kiss on his cheek as she walked by, beckoning Katalin to lead Evie over to a bed in the corner.

“Oh no,” Evie protested. She tried to twist away from the quilted blankets as Katalin lowered her down. “I’m covered in dirt.”

Katalin hesitated halfway, leaving Evie poised six fingers above the bed. “It can be cleaned,” Vanda replied dryly, gesturing for Katalin to lower her down.

Evie winced as she sank into the stuffed straw mattress, both from the pain and the fact that she had irrevocably ruined this family’s bedding.

“Let’s get you out of those clothes and into something clean.” Vanda looked at Katalin. “Maybe you’d like to help with that while I get Zsafia in to help me heat some water for a rag bath?”

*

Washed and dressed in one of Aliz’s—the polyam family’s fifth partner—loose shifts, Evie struggled to keep her eyes open as the happy group played with their children and ate their meal. They peppered Evie with questions and gracefully ignored Katalin’s increasingly agitated state.

Evie’s composure crumbled as her rescuer barely sipped at the bowl of potato stew Vanda had given her. Lajos was somewhere out in the cold and drizzle, and the situation only highlighted the fact that there was *poor*, and there was Katalin.

This family, despite all its cheer, love, and warmth, was poor. The children's clothes were painstakingly mended but were still rags, and the adults obviously carefully stretched every precious resource to its bitter end and then beyond. But at least they *had* resources. Katalin barely even had that much.

Evie leaned over, gently tapping Katalin's shoulder as Zsafia and the eldest child went outside to check on the animals. Katalin jumped, nose twitching alarmingly, until she realized that it was Evie and not one of the other adults or their three ambulatory children.

"Lajos?" she whispered.

Katalin shook her head tightly.

Evie tried another track. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"It was nothing."

Katalin's eyes wandered about the cabin, taking in everything with an expression that conveyed loss, bitterness, and an overwhelming, sad bewilderment. She stood up, drawing everyone's attention. She was easily as tall as Daan, the tallest of the family, and twice as broad.

"I need to go," she announced abruptly.

Vanda nodded genially and prepared a basket of food Evie was certain they couldn't part with easily.

"Are you sure you'll be fine?" Elek asked. Worry laced his eyes. "We've seen bear tracks recently—"

"And our neighbor caught a bear cub's paw in his trap last spring," Aliz cut in.

"We want you to know that you're welcome to stay with us if you need it," Elek finished, carefully avoiding staring at Katalin's rough dress, her bare feet, and her clearly impoverished situation. "No conditions. Winter is coming, and it's sure to be a rough one."

Katalin straightened, shoulders bracing. Her jaw set. Her fists clenched.

A shriek broke the tension.

It came from the outside where Evie assumed the lean-to and the horses were located.

Daan shot to his feet, followed by Aliz, who was clutching the baby in their arms.

Elek, however, was first out the door, racing to see what the commotion was.

Katalin lurched forward as another squeal rose, sharper and different from the first sound. Evie grabbed her arm, falling forward as Katalin rushed outside behind the others with a roar that shook the cabin's foundations.

Someone shouted in alarm, and Evie scrambled out of the bed and limped to the door.

Rain drizzled steadily, and the light shining from the door highlighted the circle of adults surrounding Katalin.

The distraught woman cradled a tiny bear cub, her face a snarl as she shielded it with her body.

"No!" she screamed at Daan, who had brought his rifle and was raising it to his shoulder.

"Get away from it," Zsafia cried. "Its mother will be here any minute!"

Katalin howled, clutching the cub tighter, her eyes black and wild.

"Girl, we're not going to kill it," Daan yelled. "We only need to shoo it away before its mother comes."

The cub wrapped its paws around Katalin's neck, its nose scrunched into her shoulder.

Evie stared.

One foreleg was perfectly fine.

The other was a stump that ended below its elbow.

“Lajos,” Evie gasped. *Impossible.*

She made for the door, forgot about the gap between building and ground, and tripped, falling face-first into the mud. The noise diverted the focus from the bear cub and Katalin to Evie, who staggered to her feet. “No, no, no, don’t *shoot!*” she cried, running toward Katalin and wrapping her arms around the woman in startling realization.

“What in ash is wrong with you two?” Daan stepped closer, rifle firmly atop his shoulder, muzzle raised. “The mother bear is coming!”

“*She’s the mother!*” Evie screamed.

Katalin and the cub froze.

Evie’s stomach dropped. Her insides were about to shrivel into themselves, but she forced herself to remain upright, to shield them with her body. Katalin and Lajos, who had been nothing but kind, were in trouble, and she had to save them.

Daan lowered the rifle as the family took a collective step back in alarm.

“What?” Elek asked, his confusion mirrored by the others’ bewildered faces.

Katalin remained tense. “He’s my son,” she explained tightly, eyes darting around the group of strangers. Her arms gripped Lajos until he squeaked. She jiggled the cub, whispering, “Come on Lajos, I need you to change.”

The cub squeaked again. Ever so gradually, he shifted into a small boy missing an arm. Evie’s arms dropped from Katalin’s shoulders in shock.

It was one thing to connect the dots to Katalin’s great mystery and quite another to *see* it.

“*Were*,” someone whispered.

Katalin flinched but straightened into a firm sense of resolve as she met the gaze of each member of the family. Her eyes skipped over Evie’s to settle on Daan.

“Yes,” she replied, stiffly. “We are *were*. Are you going to kill us now?”

There was silence until Vanda, who had remained inside with the children, leaned into the doorway. She snorted at the sight of Katalin and Lajos and the rest of her family gathered around them in the rain and mud. “Get yourselves in here,” she drawled. “It’s cold and raining, and we can continue this grand reveal in comfort.” She brushed off her skirts as she went inside, muttering, “No sense catching a cold in addition to all this drama.”

The group looked at one another. Then Elek barked out a laugh, and the tension drained away. He walked toward them, offering a hand to help Katalin up.

“*She is* right,” he said, dryly. “It is cold.” He smiled. “And we won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Daan lowered the rifle completely. “I forgot to chamber the round,” he admitted with a shrug.

Elek snorted. “Not for the first time. We’ve lost some choice game because of it too.” He jiggled his outstretched arm.

Katalin took the offered hand, letting Elek pull her to her feet with a grunt as Aliz helped Evie to hers, *tsk-tsking* about their ruined nightclothes. Evie flushed and apologized profusely as she was helped into the cabin.

Once inside with blankets around everyone and the children—Lajos included—pouring over the books Evie had retrieved from her saddlebag,

the adults turned expectantly toward Katalin.

“I didn’t think weres existed anymore,” Aliz said as they rocked the baby.

Katalin went tight, then relaxed when Evie gently took her hand and squeezed it, offering a supportive smile. She wanted Katalin to tell her about her mysterious past as much as the others.

“We do,” Katalin replied shortly. She looked down at her hand.

Evie looked too, taking in the way their fingers—large and small, dark and light brown—combined perfectly. Evie’s heart fluttered. She straightened.

Katalin swallowed. “We’re ursil.” Her soft accent grew stronger the more she spoke. “I’m from further north, beyond the mountains. Lajos and I—” She paused, closing her eyes and calming herself, “Lajos and I, we are, um, well, *I* left our clan after—” She shook her head. “Anyhow, we’re here. For now. We’ll leave soon if we are disturbing you.”

Vanda shook her head. “It’s all right,” she soothed. “We haven’t even noticed you about, save for our neighbor’s trap.” She focused on Lajos, who giggled with the toddlers like a perfectly normal human child as he flipped through Evie’s picture books. Her gaze softened. “I’m sorry that happened.”

“Lajos wandered where he wasn’t allowed,” Katalin replied. Her face was emotionless, but her voice was filled with suppressed anger. “We’ve avoided you since then.”

Evie leaned back. The *you* clearly meant *all humans*.

Katalin smiled apologetically. “Except you. I’m sorry Lajos scared you.”

Evie gasped in sudden realization. “I wasn’t hallucinating!”

At the others' blank stares, she filled them in on what happened with her accident, this time including the bear cub and the huge bear at the cave. As the polyam family teased each other and laughed, Katalin relaxed more and more.

When she finished her story, Evie tried hiding a yawn but failed. The others turned expectantly toward Katalin, in anticipation of more of her story, but she shook her head and rocked Lajos, who had curled up in her arms and fallen asleep with his mouth open.

"Well, I think *that* was quite enough excitement for one day," Vanda announced, catching Evie's attempt at muffling another yawn. "You're more than welcome to the children's bed. They can curl up in a nest on the floor for tonight, yours included."

Daan was already readying blankets and laying them down as Elek and Zsofia rocked the sleeping toddlers. The six-year-old, Emmen, was leaning up against Aliz's shins, head lolling with exhaustion, and the baby had been tucked into the adults' bed long before.

"Thank you," Evie yawned.

Katalin opened her mouth to protest, but Vanda shot her a glare. Evie patted her arm, feeling warm and protective of her fearsome friend, and pulled herself to her feet. Her head swam at the change in position, and she wobbled, but Katalin's free arm jerked out and steadied her.

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The next day remained chilly, but the lingering drizzle had ceased, leaving ominous gray clouds resting against the nearby hills.

Evie wasn't feeling much better, but a rising sense of anxiety and doom prompted her up and out of her comfortable nest—where she had woken with Katalin's body wrapped about her, warmer and safer than any blanket—and into helping the homesteading family with their morning chores.

Katalin rose soon after, groaning when Lajos and Emmen curled into bed with her and stuck icy child feet into her stomach. She woke groggily, wiping bleary eyes with the back of a hairy paw.

Zsafia, about to hand Katalin a plate filled with scrambled eggs, froze at the sight of that hand, causing Katalin to pause and gape at the offending limb. Slowly, so slowly Evie would have never seen the change if she hadn't been looking, the hair vanished, and bone shifted to appear more human and less like the paw of a very large bear.

"Sorry," Katalin muttered, red creeping into her cheeks.

Zsafia recovered with a shake and forced a smile. "It's all right. It's not something I was expecting before breakfast." She pushed the plate toward Katalin.

Katalin took it, and then a second plate for the still-sleeping Lajos.

Evie sat down at the rough-hewn table they had neglected to sit at the previous night, and Zsafia set her plate down before her. Katalin sat next to her on the thick bench, the wood squeaking under her weight.

Zsafia and Elek plopped down opposite with their own breakfasts.

At Evie's questioning glance, Elek explained, "Vanda's feeding the chickens, and Aliz and Daan are checking up on the bigger animals. They'll eat later."

Lajos and Emmen staggered up to the table, hair sticking up in all directions. Emmen clutched Evie's copy of *The Emperor of Sky* in their tiny hands. They opened it up to "Sun, Moon and Sky."

"Mama, will you read to me?" they asked.

Zsafia stared at the book with a mix of shame and hesitation.

Evie pushed her plate aside and reached for Emmen. Her head still swam a bit too much to read aloud, but she had something else that might help. And for once, she wanted to show her magic to someone outside her family. She wanted to show them the power of words and stories.

"Here, let me show you something," she said, taking the book. Holding it carefully open, she coaxed the beautiful knight, handsome princess, and ever-watchful sky out of the book and onto the bench with her magic. Emmen and Lajos giggled and clapped as the story was brought to life.

Evie knew then that no matter what, she'd show Agatha her abilities and show her what children's books meant.

*

An hour later, with directions to the nearest tiny village scrawled on rough paper in her hand, Evie was astride Ash, Dusty behind her, book bags bulging.

The mule's load was lightened by the three picture books held tight to Emmen's chest like they were the single most precious things in the universe.

"I can't thank you enough for all of your help," Evie told the family.

Vanda and Aliz grinned from where they stood with their arms wrapped about each other.

“See if you will make this a stop,” Vanda replied.

Aliz grinned fondly down at Emmen and ruffled his hair. Zsafia rocked the littlest baby while Elek and Daan bounced the toddlers’ arms up and down in good-bye.

“I’ll be back,” Evie promised.

“Don’t be a stranger yourself.” Daan smiled pointedly at Katalin.

Lajos ran up and grabbed Emmen in a big hug, then darted behind his mother’s broad legs.

Katalin grinned, one of the first real smiles Evie had ever seen from her new friend.

“I will.” She tucked Lajos against her. “We will. Thank you for the food.”

“Any time.” Zsafia’s lips twisted into a wicked grin. “It’s nice to have *someone* appreciate my cooking.”

The others laughed and pushed her.

Zsafia’s eyes twinkled.

With final goodbyes, Evie nudged Ash down the trail toward her very delayed next stop, Katalin walking beside her with only the barest of protesting snorts from Ash and Dusty.

Katalin had decided she would accompany Evie through her journey—just in case—until she returned to Hevis. Since it would take her another three or four days, Evie anticipating the extra time with her reclusive rescuer before they were forced to part ways.

As soon as they were alone, Katalin peppered Evie with questions: about Hevis, about Isten, about cities, and what it felt like exactly being surrounded by millions of people. About belonging to a nation of humans.

Evie answered each question, internally marveling over how easy it was to talk to her. Her words flowed freely without embarrassment or censure, and with each league she found herself sneaking more and more peeks at her new traveling companion.

When unencumbered by worry, Katalin had an easy laugh, and her eyes sparkled. She moved with a sure grace through the trail, stopping occasionally to pick this or that and either stuff it into her mouth or pockets or call Lajos over to eat it.

When their eyes met, it was a jolt straight down to Evie's stomach, while Katalin smiled shyly.

"We're about to go into winter hibernation," Katalin explained. At Evie's confused glance, she added, "We really are like true bears. Food grows too scarce in winter, so we go to sleep until spring. That's why we're foraging so much. We need to build up our fat stores so we can make it through the winter."

Evie felt an unexpected pang. She was going to lose Katalin before they had a chance to get to know each other. Before Evie had the opportunity to explore the fluttering in her chest.

"Do you—always hibernate?" she asked, hesitantly.

"Mmhmm." Katalin paused to drop off the trail. She caught up at a trot after a minute or two of rummaging. Two large handfuls of mushrooms were stuffed into her pockets. "Up north where we're from, the winter is a lot more severe. I don't think we'll need to hibernate as long here." She looked up, catching Evie's gaze. "We'll try to sleep in another moon cycle. And we'll wake when the snows begin to thaw."

Katalin reached out abruptly, grabbing Evie's left hand. Ash and Dusty shied at the sudden movement but only flung up their heads before settling down and stopping. Evie tightened her grip, refusing to let go.

Katalin bit her lip, dropping her eyes to their joined hands. “Will you...wait for me?” she asked.

Evie’s chest froze mid-inhale. Did she want this? “Yes,” she rasped.

Katalin leaned forward, so close that her scent surrounded Evie. Safe, sensual, strong. Exactly like how sleeping beside her had been. Like her hand felt, wrapped about Evie’s. Evie leaned forward too, unconsciously, tilting in the saddle until their faces were knuckles apart.

“May I kiss you?” Katalin’s breath whispered against Evie’s cheek. Their gazes were burning deep into one another’s. Evie felt as though Katalin gazed into her very soul, and she into Katalin’s in return.

Evie nodded.

Katalin leaned forward, closing the distance until their lips pressed. Gently at first, then deeper as Evie opened her mouth. Warmth surged up and down her body, replacing the autumn chill until she imagined she’d never be cold again. She placed her hand gently against the back of Katalin’s head, fingers running through those riotously beautiful curls, and deepened the kiss.

The extra movement unbalanced her, and she nearly fell out of the saddle. They broke apart briefly, laughing as Katalin helped her find her balance. Then Evie surged forward and kissed Katalin once again.

“Gross, Mama.”

They broke apart again. Lajos faced them with the disgust only a young child could levy toward a parent’s display of affection. The effect was marred by the berry stains smeared over his cheeks.

They laughed, clutching each other’s shoulders until Lajos demanded angrily to know what was wrong.

That led to another round of laughter and Lajos stamping his feet in frustration, demanding to be let in on the joke.

Katalin finally managed to wipe the tears from her eyes. “May I walk home with you?” she asked.

Evie beamed. “Of course.”

She wondered briefly what Agatha and Csaba and the others at Station Hevis would say about her new companions and decided that she didn’t care. This was something new, something exciting, and for the first time since she had been fired as an assistant editor, she had hope.

15th of Avril, 206th Year of the Diamond

The horse plodded steadily down the narrow trail, its book-laden packmule following sedately behind. A black cat was curled happily on top of one saddlebag, enjoying the first rays of narrow spring sunlight breaking through the overcast sky.

Another cat, gray and grumpy, rode in a seat of honor on a makeshift throne before the courier's saddle. She surveyed her new kingdom of mountain and trees regally, pausing occasionally to lap at a paw or meowl at the horse to hurry it up.

Evie smiled down at Theodosia and spared a glance to Mathilde. They had come a long way from pampered city cats to rough-and-tumble queens of the mountains.

Her fingers pressed against her breast pocket, and her smile grew wider at the crinkled paper folded there.

All three of them had come a long way.

Evie remembered her homecoming from her first disastrous route. How Agatha and Csaba had burst out of the station doors at her arrival, pulling her from her saddle and hugging her in delight and fear. Janos had sprinted over from the stables and joined the hug, squeezing until Evie had begged for them to ease up on her strained ribs. They had peppered her with questions, taking in her injuries with worried concern. As Evie had struggled to explain what had happened, it dawned on her that she had gained a new family. When she had been about to explain how she had been injured—and rescued—she had looked to where Katalin had stood, a

tentative hope rising in her chest at the possibility of something new. Possibly wonderful.

But Katalin had vanished.

That night, however, she had returned with Lajos, softly knocking on the door to Evie's tiny room to make sure that Evie was all right. Lajos had fallen in love with Mathilde, and Theodosia had deigned to allow Katalin and Evie on the tiny bed where they had talked until the first edges of dawn crept over the mountains and into the mining town.

It had taken longer for Evie to gain the courage to show Agatha her book magic. When she did, the station head had gasped with delight. And eventually, she had accepted a wider collection of children's books into the routes. The excitement for the new books with pictures and the increase in literacy among old and young was worth the expense.

Evie smelled the smoke before they rounded the bend where trees opened to a familiar clearing, where a small cabin had been built beside a polyam family's larger log home.

Two women, one large with wild tawny hair and a freshly awoken expression, the other smaller and dark, were hanging wet clothes on a line. They were surrounded by children, who perked up as Evie came into view.

"The book woman!" Lajos cried, waving his arms as he took off toward her. Emmen and the toddlers—now miniature people all of four years old—darted after him.

They swarmed Ash and Dusty, bounding about, gripping Evie's stirrups, Ash's reins, and Dusty's lead line. Theodosia hissed in warning as one attempted to pet her, and the children diverted to the more amiable Mathilde.

By this time, Evie had made it to the cabins.

Katalin, freshly awakened yet still half asleep from hibernation, tousled Lajos's hair fondly.

"She has a name, sweetling," she chided, ignoring her son to tug on Evie's coat, pulling the courier toward her for a welcome kiss.

Evie let herself be lifted from the saddle as she inhaled her partner's scent and became whole once again.

The paper crinkled as their bodies pressed together, causing Katalin to break apart, ending their end-of-hibernation reunification.

"What's that?" she asked, eyebrows folding together.

Evie pulled out the paper and handed it over. "Read it." Her heart swelled with pride as Katalin's eyes roved over the page, lips barely moving as she scanned the words. Last spring, Katalin had barely been able to read at all.

Katalin's mouth parted in surprise, eyes bright with hope. "Permanent assignment?"

Evie pulled herself upright and placed her hand on a hip.

"You're looking at the newest Hevis Station Assistant Journey, permanent personnel," she announced with pride.

Evie didn't mention the other letter that had accompanied her posting, the one from Mr. Lodge accepting Evie's resignation from the Publisher's Guild. In a postscript, he had expressed his regret that he had acted rashly before conducting an investigation—which had revealed Anda as the true manuscript leaker. Anda had been assigned to the pressman's office as a printer with no possibility for promotion.

Katalin pulled her into another bearhug, brawny arms enfolding her into her chest as Katalin cried with excitement.

Vanda, who had been watching their reunion with amusement, turned and shouted, "Elek, Zsofia, Aliz, Daan, get out here! Evie's staying! She's

stay—”

Katalin pulled Vanda into their group hug, halting her words midsentence. Together, they spun about, dancing in the cool spring air as the rest of the family joined them.

They stopped only when Theodosia announced in her firmest, most grandiose meow that the time had come for her supper.

Laughing, Evie slipped her hand into Katalin’s larger one, and together they went inside.

Acknowledgements

It feels like eternity since I first wrote what was tentatively called *The Book Woman* (imagine my shock and horror when I realized there was *another* book out there with a similar title, similar publication date and similar—albeit historical fiction not fantasy—subject matter) back in... 2018? It was a story about a young woman who makes a mistake and loses the chance at her dreams, then finds herself in a strange place with no friends, no family, no support system. And after some stumbling, she realizes that this is her home now, and that there *is* a possibility for second chances. Nothing is ever the end even if everything seems impossible in that moment.

Anyhow, I was in a fairly dark place and needed to write something with a happy ending; that was cozy and safe and focused not just on love but on finding the strength in yourself to go on.

Many thanks to my fabulous betas, Evie's first champions. To Lauren and Melissa, who are awesome in many ways. Many thanks to Less Than Three Press, who first published the story—and more thanks to NineStar and Ashley, who gave this story about second chances its own second chance. And of course to my wife, who knows she's awesome and doesn't really need the reminder.

And to you. I hope that you find your second chance too.

About the Author

Laurel Beckley has been writing ever since she started her first novel the summer before eighth grade—a hand-written epic fantasy catastrophe that has lurked in her mind and an increasingly ratty college-ruled notebook ever since.

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Coming Soon from Laurel Beckley

That Distant Dream

The shuttle jerked violently to the left, shuddered as both engines made the distinct whine of crystal overload, shrieked, and died.

Someone in the back screamed as the craft tumbled, rolling wildly through the atmosphere.

Melin gripped her armrests, eyes tightly closed as she willed her breath to remain steady. Hyperventilation would kill her faster.

She tried focusing in on what that quack psychoanalyst had said were “soothing” mantras as the on-setting gravity of reentry sucked her into her seat at a pace faster than the cheap civilian grav suit could compensate. *Breathe, breathe, breathe.*

A distant corner of her brain—the one not occupied with breathing, muscle tension, and avoiding G-lock—remembered a military-grade ship suit wouldn’t have had this problem. Her old space armor would have allowed her to carve a hole out of this blasted shuttle and free dive planetside. She sucked a tight breath through clenched teeth, chest burning. *Think of the positive.*

Then she remembered that she’d never be able to link in with a set of space armor ever again, and she was back to where she’d started.

On a free-falling shuttle with a one-way ticket to the ground.

The shuttle flipped, gaining a moment of anti-gravity that triggered a spate of relief—and breath for retching and sobbing and fervent prayers—

for its passengers.

The shuttle rolled again, nose pointing down.

Melin's vision began to gray around the edges.

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